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THE
MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

VOLUME I

"HIS BEAUTIFUL WIFE STOOD BY HIS SIDE"

Photogravure from original by Merrill.

The Works of

George W. M. Reynolds

Pauline Clarendon

The Mysteries of the Court of London

Privately Printed
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London Boston

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THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

CHAPTER I

THE CATALOGUE OF CRIMES

OUR narrative opens in the month of January, 1795,— a date belonging to one of the most eventful periods in the history of Great Britain, or indeed of Europe.

At that time King George III was in the thirty-fifth year of his reign; and his scapegrace son, the Prince of Wales, was already verging toward that important climacteric which is usually denominated " the prime of life " — his age being thirty-three.

Pitt was then in power; the Reign of Terror had just closed in Paris, leaving the French Republic in the hands of the Jacobins and the Thermidorians; and the English armies, under the Duke of York, had reaped nothing but disgrace from the previous campaigns in the Netherlands.

The memorable trial of Warren Hastings was then in progress; that of Hardy, Tooke, and Thelwall, the people's staunch champions, had recently terminated in a glorious triumph.

The Habeas Corpus Act was suspended: for democratic opinions were spreading rapidly throughout England — and the doctrine of " the divine right of kings " was falling to a miserable discount.

The Ministers were demanding more money to carry on the war against France; Wilberforce was agitating the question of the slave-trade; and the approaching marriage of the Prince of Wales with the Princess Caroline of Brunswick had been announced to the nation.

This rapid glance at the state of political affairs will not only give the reader an idea of the interesting period at which our tale commences, but is likewise in certain points an indispensable preface to the incidents that are to follow.

It was, then, in the beginning of January, 1795, and on a fine frosty evening, that a number of bagmen, or commercial travellers, were assembled around a blazing fire and sipping their hot toddy in the room especially set apart for their accommodation at the George and Blue Boar, Holborn.

Some of them were about to depart that very night upon their journeys in various directions; others had just returned from long tours, and were felicitating themselves on the prospect of a few weeks' holiday. Those who were on the point of setting out were already equipped to encounter the nipping chill of the weather, save in respect to their heavy greatcoats which hung to the pegs in the apartment; while those who had come home again were indulging in the luxurious indolence of dressing-gowns and slippers.

The conversation was general: for the bagmen, frequenting that tavern, were all well known to each other — and even when a newcomer in the "profession" appeared amongst them, their convivial heartiness of disposition and frank hospitality of character soon placed him on terms of ease and familiarity. For there is no class of men more generous nor more intellectual and enlightened, taking them as a body, than that of commercial travellers.

It was between six and seven o'clock on the evening of which we are speaking, and the bagmen were in the middle of a warm though perfectly good-tempered discussion on some political subject, when the door opened, and a short, thin man, who looked like a locomotive mummy, so completely was he enveloped in greatcoats and " comforters," bustled into the room.

" Holloa, Page — old fellow — how are you? " exclaimed every voice simultaneously; and the demand was made with a heartiness of tone and manner which indicated how welcome was the presence of this new arrival to the travellers already assembled at the George and Blue Boar.

" As well as ever, and as hungry as a hunter," responded

Mr. Page, who, by the assistance of the active waiter, immediately began to extricate himself from the mass of upper clothing which he wore. " But it is a precious sharp evening, I can tell you! The roads are as hard as iron, and the air is what might be called quite crisp. Now, John," he continued, as he threw aside the large woollen article that had enveloped his neck, turning at the same time toward the waiter whom he thus addressed, " get me a nice steak and oyster sauce; and send Boots with a pair of slippers."

" Yes, sir," replied the waiter, immediately afterward disappearing to execute the commissions specified.

Room was now made for Mr. Page near the fire; and, having taken his seat, he held his hands close to the cheerful grate until a genial warmth began to pervade his form. He was a man of about five and forty, with a thin, sallow, and angular countenance, small restless gray eyes, and a good set of teeth. His forehead was remarkably high, and his head was bald on the crown; but on each side the bushy iron-gray hair stuck out, mingling with the whiskers which, of a somewhat darker hue, met underneath his chin. His whole appearance gave the idea of one of that bustling kind of persons who are remarkably shrewd in matters of business and know tolerably well how to take care of " Number One."

" Where do you come from to-day, Page? " inquired the commercial traveller who had made room for him near the fire, and next to whom he was therefore seated.

" I slept at Aylesbury last night, and started for town at nine this morning," was the answer. " Forty good miles is not such a bad day's work, I take it; but you know that I don't drive the worst bit of horse-flesh on the road. I've been out for the last four months, and have not been idle, I can assure you. There are few places in all the Midland counties that I have not visited; and I think that my governors, Hodson and Morley, will be pretty well satisfied when I call upon them in Wood Street to-morrow morning with all the fresh orders I have got and the monies I have collected."

" Any news up Aylesbury way? " asked one of the travellers. " I am well acquainted with all that part of Buckinghamshire, and feel an interest in it."

" Then perhaps you know Sir Richard Stamford — eh? " exclaimed Page, becoming suddenly excited as if he had something of importance to communicate, and which was at that moment revived in his memory.

" I can't say that I ever saw Sir Richard, to my knowledge," answered the individual who had previously spoken; " but I know him by name and all about him, as well as we may be aware of everything in the life of King George himself, without ever having seen his Majesty."

" Then you doubtless consider Sir Richard Stamford to be a very wealthy man? " cried Mr. Page; " and maybe you have heard that he is a good husband and deeply attached to his beautiful wife? "

" Those are precisely the opinions I have formed of him," was the reply. " His country-seat is about three miles from Aylesbury; and I never was in that town without hearing the people speaking about him — ay, and most favourably, too. He is reported to spend a deal of money in the place, and to do a world of good in the shape of charity. Besides, he has a large share in Ramsey and Martin's bank, which is noted for the accommodation it affords the tradesmen of the town and the farmers in all that district of Bucks."

" Isn't it wonderful," exclaimed Page, his sallow countenance assuming a mysterious aspect, while all his listeners gazed upon him in mingled curiosity and amazement, — " isn't it wonderful," he repeated, " how the world may be deceived by outward appearances — how a man may pass off for years as a saint, whereas in his heart he is a very demon all the time? "

" But what has all this to do with Sir Richard Stamford? " demanded several voices.

" What has it all to do with him? " cried Page, casting a still more solemn and mysterious glance around upon the company. " Why, just this — that when I came down to breakfast in the coffee-room at the inn where I put up at Aylesbury, I heard that the whole town was in consternation; for such a complication of crimes — "

" Crimes! " repeated several of the commercial travellers, drawing their chairs nearer to the speaker.

" What? — and in connection with Sir Richard Stamford?" demanded the individual who had previously expressed his interest in all that concerned Aylesbury.

" Yes — crimes, and in connection with Sir Richard Stamford," resumed Page; " for this baronet who, as our friend here just now stated, was famous for his charities and was a sleeping-partner in the principal bank in the place —this gentleman of whom everybody entertained such a high opinion — "

" Well — well; what has he done? " cried several impatient voices.

" Rather ask me what he has not done," said Page; " for surely all possible crimes are summed up in fraud — forgery — murder — and arson! "

" Good heaven! " ejaculated the bagmen, literally bounding upon their chairs, while the sentiments of horror, amazement, doubt, and curiosity congealed into lines on all their countenances, " you cannot be in earnest! "

" I never was more in earnest in my life, friends," responded Page, emphatically.

" But explain — tell us how it happened," exclaimed one.

" So many crimes! " observed another.

" And all to be perpetrated by one man! " cried a third.

" It is scarcely probable! " remarked a fourth.

" You will cease to be skeptical when you see to-morrow morning's newspapers," said Page, shaking his head solemnly. " I tell you that Sir Richard Stamford, baronet," he continued in a measured and decisive tone, " has taken in every tradesman at Aylesbury — committed endless forgeries on the bank in which he is a partner — assassinated his beautiful wife — and set fire to his own splendid country-seat."

" God help us! " cried many voices.

" I did not succeed in obtaining many particulars relative to this fearful catalogue of crimes," continued Mr. Page; " for the persons with whom I conversed in the coffee-room at Aylesbury were all talking at once, each giving his own version of the complicated affair, and every one of these tales differing from the rest. But the outline of the dreadful tragedy appeared to be something in this shape, — that Mr. Martin, one of the banking firm, being absent, Mr. Ramsey, the other partner, discovered last evening the forgeries which Sir Richard Stamford had committed; that he went straight off to Stamford Manor to demand explanations, but that the baronet being out at the time, he communicated the object of his visit to Lady Stamford; that a little after midnight Sir Richard returned home, and was assailed by violent reproaches on the part of Mr. Ramsey and bitter upbraidings from her ladyship, who was half-distracted at the terrible discovery of her husband's guilt; and that in his rage the baronet forcibly expelled Ramsey from the house, killed his wife in a paroxysm of fury, and having set fire to the manor, doubtless for the purpose of concealing the deed of blood, immediately absconded."

" The man must be a perfect monster! " ejaculated the commercial traveller who was so well acquainted with Aylesbury. " I have often seen Mr. Ramsey at the bank: he is a handsome young man of some eight or nine and twenty, and very affable. At his father's death he became head of the firm, and is universally beloved in the town and district."

" I suppose there will be a reward offered for the apprehension of the baronet? " observed another of the bagmen.

" Of course there will," responded Mr. Page; " and a full description of his person will be published."

" Have you ever seen him? " inquired the previous speaker.

" Two or three times," answered Page. " He bears a remarkable likeness to the royal family; and people do say that when his Gracious Majesty was Prince of Wales and so mysteriously connected with the beautiful Quakeress, Hannah Lightfoot — "

The remainder of the sentence was interrupted by the sudden entrance of the waiter laden with the dinner which Mr. Page had ordered; and as this worthy gentleman had been rendered almost ravenous by the sharp frosty air, he desisted from further observations in order to address himself to the succulent steak, rich oyster sauce, and smoking potatoes which were now served up.

The presence of the waiter reminded those bagmen who were to set out that evening of the necessity of calling for their bills without delay; and the conversation relative to the tragical occurrences near Aylesbury was accordingly interrupted by the bustle attendant upon settling scores, remunerating waiters and chambermaids, putting on greatcoats and comforters, filling flasks with brandy, lighting cigars, shaking hands with those who remained behind, and all the usual ceremonies attendant upon departure.

At length the room was cleared of two-thirds of the commercial travellers; and as some of those who had just returned from their journeys were compelled to retire to their chambers in order to prepare their accounts and papers for inspection by their employers on the morrow, Mr. Page shortly found himself left with only two companions out of a dozen.

With those friends, however, he presently renewed the conversation, one of them having asked him what he was about to say when the appearance of the waiter had interrupted him.

"Oh! I remember the topic on which I was speaking," exclaimed the talkative Mr. Page, pushing away his plate after having made a hearty dinner. "I was going to observe that when his Majesty was Prince of Wales, he became connected with a certain Quakeress, named Hannah Lightfoot. Some say he privately married her; and it has also been rumoured that there was a son born. This child — according to the same vague authority — was secretly removed to the house of the late Sir William and Lady Stamford and adopted by them, her ladyship's own infant happening to die at the period. All this I heard at Aylesbury — but of course I don't pretend in any way to vouch for it."

"I should think not, indeed!" exclaimed a gentleman who, entering the apartment at the instant, but unperceived by the commercial travellers, had caught the latter portion of Mr. Page's observations.

The bagmen started as those words, uttered in a tone of mingled imperiousness and contempt, fell upon their ears; and turning round they beheld the newcomer from whose lips the disdainful remark had fallen.

He was an individual of remarkably imposing appearance. His features were handsome, though his countenance was now evidently flushed with wine; his figure was tall, well-proportioned, and commanding, and in his gait and gestures there was an easy elegance combined with a nobility of air which bespoke the polished gentleman. The intellectuality of his face would have, however, been somewhat marred by its roundness, the gracefulness of the oval being destroyed by the fatness of the cheeks, had not the high and open forehead redeemed the fault. His hair was of that uncertain colour which appears of a dark chestnut in some lights, and auburn in others, and it was naturally curled and wavy. His age seemed to be a few years over thirty; and his attire was neat, good, but unpretending.

Such was the individual who made the above-mentioned remark as he entered the commercial-room at the George and Blue Boar; and taking off his hat, cloak, and warm gloves he seated himself at a table.

Almost immediately afterward the waiter made his appearance with a steaming tumbler of rum punch, which the gentleman had ordered as he passed the bar.

But from the first instant that the stranger had met the eyes of Mr. Page, this worthy individual had not ceased to stare at him. It was not, however, with the offensive gaze of impertinent curiosity; nor was it the rude survey of coarse vulgarity; but it was the fixed contemplation of one who is suddenly struck by a resemblance, and who fancies he knows the object of his scrutiny, yet on the other hand feels almost certain that he must be mistaken.

At this juncture the other two commercial travellers rose and retired; and Mr. Page was left alone with the stranger.

CHAPTER II

THE FLIGHT AND THE PURSUIT

We should observe that hitherto the gentleman whom we are still compelled to denominate " the stranger " had not noticed the searching earnestness of gaze with which the bagman regarded him. Indeed, no sooner had he taken his seat at the table, when he appeared to fall into a profound reverie, — as if totally forgetting the observation he had made on entering — the words which had elicited it — and the presence of any one else in the room.

Mr. Page, feeling his survey of the stranger would be deemed an impertinence, if remarked, turned toward the fire, which he poked vigorously, then he took a few sips of whiskey and water, and tried to make himself comfortable. But there was a feeling of uneasiness upon him, which rapidly grew more painful; and in a few minutes he found that he was again staring at the gentleman more intently than at first.

" It is impossible that I can be mistaken," thought the bewildered commercial traveller, fidgeting in his chair; " and yet it is equally impossible that I can be right. He would never come into a public room in this manner — particularly so soon after the event. Nevertheless, the likeness is striking! The same hair — the same high and open forehead — the same stature — the same well-proportioned form! Upon my soul it is very puzzling — and very, very disagreeable."

Having reached this point in his reflections, he rang the bell violently and ordered his glass to be replenished. The waiter was evidently astonished at the excitement manifested in the summons, and begged submissively to know " whether the last tumbler was to Mr. Page's liking? " The reply was given in the affirmative; and the functionary departed with his feelings considerably relieved by the assurance — for he had begun to fancy that something had occurred to annoy one of his master's best customers.

On his return with the hot toddy, the waiter found Mr. Page gazing with painful earnestness upon the strange gentleman, who, still unconscious of the attention which his presence thus excited, was now listlessly sipping his rum punch and looking up in a vacant manner at a picture of a sea-fight suspended between the windows.

" John," said the commercial traveller, in a low and scarcely audible tone, as he mysteriously beckoned the waiter close up to him; then, casting a furtive glance toward the stranger, he demanded laconically, " Who is that gentleman? "

" I really don't know, sir," was the reply, also delivered in a whisper. " But master seemed to recognize him when he ordered his rum punch at the bar."

" Then go and ask your master who he is, John," responded Mr. Page.

The waiter glided out of the room with the quick and noiseless step peculiar to his fraternity; and the commercial traveller said to himself, as he stirred his whiskey toddy, " Now I shall have all my doubts cleared up — or my suspicions confirmed."

But Mr. Page was doomed to experience disappointment, and to be plunged back into the bewilderment from which he sought to emancipate himself; for the waiter returned with a solemn countenance; and while affecting to be busily engaged in poking the fire, — as the stranger was now looking in that direction, — he said in a low and mysterious whisper, " Please, sir, master told me to mind my own business and not ask impertinent questions."

" Then it must be as I thought! " murmured Mr. Page; and he mechanically turned round to take another survey of the object of his attention, when he encountered the steady and almost haughty gaze of that gentleman's full blue eyes. The commercial traveller quailed beneath the look, in which there was something so confident, proud, and self-sufficient that all the man's doubts again sprung up in his mind, and with renewed force; for he thought within himself, " That is not the air of a guilty person! "

Still there was something strange and mysterious in the cold and haughty silence which the gentleman preserved; for the travellers' room at a commercial inn was a place whence frigid ceremony was banished, and where the formality of an introduction was not regarded as a necessary preliminary to conversation.

As these reflections passed through the mind of Mr. Page, he suddenly recollected that the stranger had made an observation when he first entered the apartment, — an observation, too, that was at least contemptuous, if not absolutely rude. " I should think not, indeed! " was the remark that had fallen from the gentleman's lips; and it was in reference to certain words which Page was uttering at the time.

The commercial traveller accordingly resolved upon making an attempt to draw the stranger into conversation, and, with a short prefatory cough, he said, " A very cold evening, sir."

" Very," was the laconic answer; and the gentleman moved half-around in his seat — not absolutely turning his back upon Mr. Page, but just giving him so much of the cold shoulder as to intimate pretty plainly that he did not wish to enter into conversation with him.

The bagman bit his lip; then, suddenly mustering up all his courage, he rose from his chair, approached the table at which the gentleman was seated, and, looking him fully in the face, said:

" I beg your pardon, sir — but have I not had the pleasure of seeing you before? "

" Nothing is more probable, sir," answered the gentleman, in a haughty tone, and with knitting brows; " but I should imagine that the mere fact of my presence here would of itself indicate my desire to remain unnoticed and unrecognized."

" I should think so, too," ejaculated Page, with an abruptness that perfectly astounded the gentleman. " The first moment you entered the room, a suspicion of who you were flashed to my mind — and now your own words have banished all my doubts."

The stranger had risen indignantly from his seat in the midst of these observations, to which he seemed prepared to give some cutting reply; but Page, having thus hastily blurted forth the words that came uppermost at the instant, rushed from the room.

" The unmannerly cur! — the rude boor! " exclaimed the gentleman aloud, while rage was depicted in every lineament of his flushed and heated countenance. " Fool that I was to come hither — and thus risk discovery! "

Then, without further hesitation, he threw on his hat and cloak, and drawing up the collar of the latter so as to conceal his countenance as much as possible, he hastily quitted the apartment.

In the meantime Mr. Page had rushed, with frantic excitement, to the landlord, whom he chanced to find alone in the bar-parlour.

" Do you know whom you have in the house at this moment? " demanded the commercial traveller, panting for breath.

" Yes, sir, I do," was the cool reply; " but I also know that he does not wish to be recognized. For when he passed the bar, perceiving that I was aware of who he was, he made me a sign — "

" Perdition on the sign! " interrupted Mr. Page, angrily. " Are you a man and a true Briton — and can you remain idly here while such a person is beneath your roof? "

" If he chooses to come *incognito*," said the landlord, now growing irritated in his turn, " what business is it to you or me, I should like to know? "

" Business! — but there he goes, by heaven! " vociferated the excited commercial traveller, catching a glimpse through the bar-windows of the rapidly retreating form of the gentleman in his capacious cloak.

And in another minute Mr. Page was bounding after him.

But tripping over a mat in the passage, he fell heavily; and rising with difficulty — for he was seriously bruised in his officious haste to perform what he deemed to be a duty owing to society — he observed at a glance that the gentleman in the cloak had succeeded in effecting his escape from the house.

Scarcely, however, had he ascertained this fact when two stout, seedily dressed men, each carrying a short thick ash-stick in his hand, entered the tavern; and as they crossed the threshold, one observed to the other, “ We’d better not say at fust that we’re constables, Bill.”

“ Constables! — are you constables? ” cried Page, darting forward in spite of his bruises. Then, without waiting for an answer, he exclaimed, “ Because if you are, I can guess your errand and can give you some information.”

“ Well — don’t speak so loud about it, sir, if you please,” growled one of the men; “ ’cos vy, d’ye see, when once it gets known in a large place of this kind that there’s peace-officers on the scent the indiwidual wanted finds a many ways of escaping.”

“ Come along with me, my friends — one moment — and I shall be ready,” said Page, sinking his voice to a whisper though speaking hurriedly; and he conducted them into the commercial room.

Having rung the bell and ordered his boots, — for it will be remembered that he had betaken himself to the luxury of slippers on his arrival, — he observed in a hasty tone of interrogatory to the officers, “The Aylesbury business—eh?”

“ Just so,” was the equally laconic reply; and the man who gave it pulled out a printed paper offering a hundred pounds’ reward for the apprehension of Sir Richard Stamford.

“ One glance at it, if you please! ” cried Page, snatching the bill out of his hand. Then rapidly casting his eyes over the description given of the baronet’s person, he continued, speaking in quick, jerking, and disjointed sentences, “ Ah! I thought I was right — I knew I couldn’t be mistaken! Tall — well-formed — rather stout — walks very upright — imposing gait — commanding mien — dark auburn hair — handsome countenance — blue eyes — rather florid complexion — fine teeth. That’s it — the baronet to a tittle! But here’s the Boots.”

With these words Mr. Page returned the bill to the constable and seized his boots from the hands of the hotel functionary named; then, imperiously signalling that individual to leave the room, he hastily equipped himself for the purpose of accompanying the officers.

“ If we happen to meet the landlord in the passage, my friends,” he observed in a rapid tone, “ we won’t let him know who you are or what you want, because I have seen enough to convince me that he is favourably inclined toward the baronet — and there's no saying how he may find means of sending him notice of what's going on, should we fail in capturing the villain to-night."

"All right," returned the officers, and away they went in company with Page, whose sense of duty toward society was wonderfully sharpened by the reward offered for the apprehension of Sir Richard Stamford.

Close by there was a hackney-coach stand, and the commercial traveller walked straight up to the water man, and put a crown into his hand, saying, "My good fellow, a gentleman in a cloak took a vehicle here a few minutes ago — I am sure he did; now, where did he order the driver to take him?"

"All right, sir — Edgeware Road," replied the waterman, joyfully pocketing the welcome gift. "'Twas a yaller jarvey —"

"Look alive, then!" interrupted the active Mr. Page, as he sprang into a coach, the door of which he hastily opened himself; and the constables having tumbled in after him, he exclaimed, "Edgeware Road — and a guinea for the jarvey if he catches up the other vehicle."

This exciting promise was instantaneously communicated to the driver by the waterman, who in equally succinct terms gave such information as enabled that functionary to comprehend which coach it was that was now to be pursued; and away went the equipage at a rattling pace.

"It wasn't a bad dodge of mine to commence inquiries at the coach-stand," observed Mr. Page to the constables, as they rolled along toward Oxford Street; "for may I be hanged if I knew what direction the fugitive took when he quitted the hotel."

"Oh! then he was at the George — eh?" exclaimed one of the constables; and turning to his comrade, he said, "So you see our information was right, Bill, arter all. But how was it, sir," he continued, again addressing himself to Page, "that you didn't collar him, if so be you twigged him there?"

"I can assure you that my palms itched to clutch him," replied the commercial traveller; "but I wasn't certain that he was really the man, and I was fearful of getting myself into a scrape by seizing the wrong one. Assault, battery, false imprisonment, defamation, and all that sort of thing, you know, kept rising up in my mind and restraining my arm."

" Lord bless ye, sir, if we was to be on'y half so partickler as that, we should never do no bisness," said the constable; " should us, Bill Sneesby? "

" You're about right, Mr. Grint," responded the individual thus blandly appealed to. " Our vay is to knock folks down fust and take 'em up arterward. If so be we've nailed the right uns, then there's no harm done; but if so be we've got the wrong sow by the ear, we apologizes — and there's an end on't."

" And suppose that in this last case," observed Mr. Page, " the innocent persons whom you've treated so roughly don't choose to be satisfied with an excuse? "

" Then we locks 'em up for interfering with us in the execution of our dooty," was Grint's prompt reply.

" Ah! I understand," exclaimed the commercial traveller, whose opinion of the morality of the two constables was not improved by this avowal. Wishing, therefore, to change the conversation, — which, we should observe, he had himself frequently interrupted by thrusting his head forth from the window to see if the yellow coach was in sight, — he said, " I suppose you are constables from Aylesbury? "

" Just so, sir," replied Grint; " and on coming up to town just now, we happened to meet a friend of our'n wot lives at Aylesbury and had been in London for the last week or so. Well, we got into talk together — and then we had summat to drink — and it was nat'ral enough that me and my partner here should tell him all about Sir Richard, 'cos he hadn't heard a word on it afore; as how should he? seeing that it on'y happened last night, and a matter of forty mile away from town. Well, sir, after he'd recovered hisself a bit — for he was struck quite stupid, as one may say — he says, says he, ' Mr. Grint, if ever I see Sir Richard Stamford in all my life, I saw him only a few minutes before I met you. He was in his cloak; and he turned into the George and Blue Boar, Holborn.' This was quite enough for Bill Sneesby and me; and it was fortunate we hadn't told our Aylesbury friend about the reward — or else he'd have wanted to go sheers — "

" Here we are at the Edgeware Road! " suddenly cried Page. Then thrusting his head out of the window, he exclaimed to the driver, " Push along, my man — don't spare your horse-flesh! Do you see anything of the yellow coach yet? "

" Nothing, sir," was the reply.

Page still kept his head out of the window; and he strained his eyes to the utmost as he looked up the road. The night was moonlit, the atmosphere was of silvery clearness, and all was bright with the sheen of the frost, so that he could distinguish objects at a considerable distance.

Suddenly the coachman uttered an ejaculation and at the same instant the commercial traveller caught sight of a vehicle a quarter of a mile ahead.

" That's it, sir! " exclaimed the driver. " There — it's crossing over from one side of the road to the t'other — most likely on account of the flintstones — "

" I see — I see! " interrupted Page, who at that moment got a glimpse of the yellow side and wheels of the coach. " Push along, my fine fellow! You'll earn your guinea yet! "

" And us the hundred pound reward, sir," added Mr. Grint, in a tone of satisfaction as lively as it was in his stolid nature to render it.

" Why — they're a-stopping, sir! " ejaculated the driver. " I s'pose they're a-waiting for us to come up with 'em — "

" No such thing! " cried Page, who was hanging half-way out of the window, and straining his eyes to the full extent of their visual powers; " the villain has just jumped out of the coach — yes — 'tis he, by heaven! "

" A tall man in a cloak, sir? " exclaimed the driver, without turning his head, but whipping his horses furiously.

" Yes — to be sure! " cried Page. " I saw him as plain as possible; he cut across the road — to those houses on the left there — "

" And now the yaller jarvey is turning around to come back again," said Mr. Grint, who was gazing from the other window.

This last piece of information was perfectly true, and in a couple of minutes the two vehicles met. The one containing the constables and Page pulled up, and the yellow coach followed the example. Out sprang the commercial traveller from the former; and in breathless haste he assailed the driver of the latter with a host of questions.

" Which way is he gone? Where has he hidden himself? What did he say? "

"Who d'ye mean?" demanded the coachman belonging to the yellow vehicle.

"Why, your fare, to be sure," answered Page; "the gentleman in the cloak!"

"Well, he didn't say much," was the response; "only when he happened to twig that you or some one with ye was hanging half-way out of that coach, he instantly called out to me to stop, tossed me a guinea, and cut off."

"But in which direction?" demanded the impatient commercial traveller.

"Ah! there you bother me," returned the man, evidently fencing with the question.

"You mean that he gave you a guinea not to answer any questions?" cried the astute Page. "Come, here are two; and now tell me the truth."

"Thank'ee kindly, sir," said the jarvey, leaning down from his box to receive the gold which Page handed up to him; then, having clutched the reward, he added, "But it's precious little information I can give you, sir. All I know is that when the gentleman jumped out of the coach, he cut across the road and was out of sight in a minute. Whether he turned down the lane there, or whether he went into one of the little gardens in front of the houses close by, I really can't say. But it must have been one or t'other, for he disappeared in a jiffy."

"And that's all you can tell me for the two guineas!" exclaimed the irritated commercial traveller.

"Every bit, sir," responded the man; and whipping his horses as he thus spoke, the yellow vehicle rolled rapidly away.

"Perdition!" cried Page; "he has fairly swindled me! But never mind, I shall not give up the chase, so follow me, my men, as quick as you choose."

And conceiving that it was not worth while to return into the vehicle in order to accomplish the little distance to the spot where the object of pursuit had descended from the yellow coach, the commercial traveller took to his heels, rushing along the road like a madman.

Grint and Sneesby, supposing that Page intended them to follow him likewise on foot, now leaped out of the vehicle; but the coachman, suddenly impressed with the idea that his fare were endeavouring to bilk him, bounded from the box, and laid a vigorous grasp upon the collars of the two constables.

An altercation now took place which occupied ten minutes; for Mr. Sneesby looked to his principal, Mr. Grint, to emancipate him from any liability in the case, and, on his side, Mr. Grint was fearful that, if he once paid the money, he should not be able to recover it again from Mr. Page. At length the two constables determined upon reëntering the vehicle and driving after the commercial traveller, and this plan was accordingly adopted.

In the meantime Mr. Page, having reached that part of the road where he fancied that the object of pursuit must have sought concealment somewhere or other, began to knock at every door in the row of houses with the gardens in front; but to his reiterated question whether a tall gentleman in a cloak had just taken refuge there, he was met by a decisive negative. At length, having thus disturbed the inmates of half a dozen dwellings, — for it was now nearly eleven o'clock, — he was on the point of giving up the pursuit in despair, when suddenly he recollected the lane to which the driver of the yellow coach had alluded.

"Well, I won't be beaten yet awhile," he murmured to himself; and away he sped along the lane, not pausing to reflect whether the constables were following him, nor whether, if he did succeed in overtaking the fugitive, he could possibly secure him without their assistance.

On, therefore, rushed Mr. Page, as if he himself were pursued by the officers of justice; and Heaven knows how long he would have thus exercised his speed, had he not suddenly been stopped by a huge fellow, whom he encountered at a turning in the lane. The moonlight fell upon as villainous a physiognomy as ever one would expect to meet outside of Newgate; and the commercial traveller was by no way reassured when a more attentive examination of the man made him acquainted with the fact that he carried a great club-stick in his hand.

The result was inevitable, and just what our readers might suppose. Mr. Page was compelled to surrender his purse, his watch, and his gold ring upon the spot, and the robber, not satisfied with this booty, insisted upon searching his victim's garments.

A mortal terror now came over the miserable commercial traveller, for all in an instant it flashed to his memory that he had about him his pocketbook, containing bills of exchange and other documents of importance, which he had received during the last week of his tour, and which belonged to his employers, Messrs. Hodson and Morley, of Wood Street.

" Come, now," exclaimed the ruffian, as Mr. Page exhibited an inclination to offer resistance to the attempt at personal search, " none of your gammon with me, or I'll dash your brains out! "

And seizing the collar of the writhing victim with one hand, he brandished the club in a menacing manner with the other, so that Mr. Page was forced to surrender at discretion. The pocketbook was accordingly discovered by the thief in the course of a few moments, and when he had hastily glanced on its contents by the moonlight, he said in an abrupt tone of interrogation, " Bills of exchange — eh? "

" Y-e-s," replied the miserable Page, who was shivering from head to foot, alike through cold and terror.

" Well, they're of more use to you than they are to me," continued the robber, " and so you may have the book back again for fifty guineas."

" Fifty guineas! " repeated the unhappy commercial traveller. " I haven't got a farthing left about me. You have taken my purse, which contains ten or a dozen guineas — "

" A miserable trifle! " exclaimed the robber. " Is it worth your while to give fifty guineas to have the pocketbook back, with all its contents, just as they are? "

" Worth my while! " cried Page, a gleam of hope breaking in upon him even through the black cloud of his present misfortune, " to be sure it is. I should be ruined — utterly ruined — if I didn't recover it."

" Well, then," said the man, " I'll tell you how we can manage the affair. To-morrow night, at nine o'clock precisely, you must be walking about at the beginning of Tooley Street, — just over London Bridge, you know, — and there you'll meet a young woman dressed in black. She won't speak to you first, but you must go up to her and ask whether she's waiting for anybody. She'll reply that she has found something and is looking for the owner. Then you may tell her that you're the person she's expecting;

and when you put fifty guineas into her hand, — mind, fifty golden shiners, and no flimsies, — she'll give you up your pocketbook."

"Can't it be done before to-morrow night?" demanded Page, who was most anxious to call upon his employers in the morning.

"No; you must bide my time," was the rough and decisive answer. "And now let me give you a little bit of advice, which is, not to try any plant upon the young woman, or get constables to lurk about for the purpose of grabbing her; because she'll have friends watching at no great distance, and as certain as she is to be rescued, so sure are you to have a bullet through your head. Do you understand me?"

"It would be difficult to mistake your meaning," responded Page.

"So much the better," observed the robber. "And now I shall say 'good night.' But I may as well give you a little bit of information, though, before we part," he added, as an idea struck him. "The fact is, my dear sir," he continued, assuming a familiar tone, "I'm a very useful man in my way, and not particular to a point or two. I'm pretty well known to a good many swellish coves at the West End, although they don't recognize me if we happen to meet in Bond Street. Our intimacy is all private, and only lasts while I've any business in hand for them. But what I was going to observe is, that if you ever get into any trouble and want a clever chap to get you out of it, or if you may happen to require anything of a delicate nature to be done neat and clean, you may apply to me. There's a flash crib in Horslydown, known as the "Beggar's Staff," and a message left at the bar for Joe the Magsman will in due course be delivered to me. So now good night."

Having thus delivered himself, the huge ruffian turned and proceeded at a rapid rate down the lane, flourishing his club in a manner indicating as significantly as possible that it would be dangerous to follow him.

But Mr. Page had not the least idea of making the attempt. Indeed, he was so astounded by the strange tirade with which the thief closed the interview that he could not reply, even if he had wished, to the parting salutation.

At length, recalling his scattered ideas, he began to deplore most bitterly the wild-goose chase which he had that night undertaken and which had brought him into his present unenviable predicament; and then he bethought himself of the two constables whom he had left in the hackney-coach.

"The lazy scoundrels!" he ejaculated aloud; "if they had only followed me as I enjoined them, this misfortune could not have occurred. On the contrary, we might have captured the thief who has plundered me. By heaven, 'tis provoking — very provoking! Purse, watch, ring, all gone, and fifty guineas to pay to-morrow night for the pocket-book."

While thus giving way to his vexation, Mr. Page rapidly retraced his steps, and in a short time he reached the main road, where he vainly looked about for the hackney-coach. The driver had become tired of waiting, and the constables were accordingly compelled to undertake the settlement of the fare — in pursuance of which agreement, the vehicle carried them back to Holborn.

It was one o'clock in the morning when the commercial traveller — exhausted with fatigue, half-dead with cold, and bitterly repenting of his folly in meddling with matters that did not immediately concern him — reached the George and Blue Boar, where he lost no time in seeking the repose of which he stood so much in need.

But even this he was not permitted to enjoy so long as he could have wished; for scarcely had the thousand churches of the mighty metropolis proclaimed the hour of seven, when he was aroused by a violent shaking through the medium of a rough hand applied to the shoulder, and, starting up, he beheld, by the dim light of the cold wintry morning, the forms of Grint and Sneesby by his bedside.

These worthies came to dun him for the hackney-coach fare which they had been forced to make up between them, and the wretched man was compelled to borrow the money of the landlord to satisfy their rapacity.

CHAPTER III

THE BEAUTIFUL SISTERS

We must now return to the gentleman in the cloak who was the object of the wild-goose chase which terminated in so deplorable a manner for Mr. Page.

The reader will remember that there was a row of houses with gardens in front of them, at that part of the Edgeware Road where the fugitive had suddenly and unaccountably disappeared. These dwellings were small, but neat externally and comfortable within, and they were dignified with the name of " Villas." The speculator who had built them inherited from his father the not very euphonious name of Gubbins; and, though his ambition prompted him to bestow immortality on the appellation by calling the range of houses " Gubbins's Terrace," his friends had wisely interfered to rescue the " sweet little cottages " from such an ugly nomenclature. The result was that the title of " Paradise Villas " was fixed upon as a more pleasing substitute, and was conferred accordingly.

The villa that stood last in the row and at the angle of the lane in which Mr. Page was eased of his property was occupied by a widower and his two daughters. Mr. Clarendon was a gentleman of small — very small — income, allowed by a wealthy and titled relative. He had been unfortunate — some said improvident — in early life, and had married the beautiful but penniless daughter of a poor clergyman. This match gave great umbrage to the proud and aristocratic family to which he himself belonged, and when his own means were exhausted, all that he could obtain from the bounty of his cousin, Lord Marchmont, was an allowance of a hundred and fifty pounds a year, just to keep him from actual penury.

Mrs. Clarendon was a woman of fine feeling, generous sympathies, and keen sensibility, and her husband's misfortunes preyed deeply upon her mind. She secretly reproached herself with being the cause of the disgrace into which he had fallen in respect to his family, and, taking the matter to heart, literally pined away until she sank into the tomb. Mr. Clarendon now found himself left, at the age of five and thirty, with two young children totally dependent upon his care, and he resolved to perform his duty toward his motherless daughters. His family still persisted in disowning him, and he accordingly retired into some remote and cheap district, where he reared and educated the girls to the best of his means. They grew up in all the glory of maiden loveliness, but being deprived of the more delicate supervision of a mother, and having scarcely any female society in the seclusion which their father's slender resources compelled him to adopt, their minds were not imbued with those strictly feminine principles which the maternal parent can alone inculcate, foster, and permanently establish. Their virtue wanted the stamina necessary to maintain it when it should have to pass through the world's ordeal; it was rather of a negative quality than otherwise — existing because it had as yet undergone no temptation. Their religion was confined to a mere knowledge of the sacred writings, read and remembered like any other book, and believed in because they had been taught to hold that faith; but the deep conviction, the holy reliance, and the profound feeling, which constitute true religion, were deficient. They went to church with regularity, as many other giddy and thoughtless young ladies go, but they never had had any one to impress upon them the necessity of laying aside worldly thoughts, and throwing the whole soul into the divine worship. Good-natured, affectionate, and light-hearted girls were Octavia and Pauline Clarendon; artless, frank, and innocent likewise were they, because totally ignorant of the world's ways, and inexperienced in its snares, its perfidies, and its deceits.

When their education was completed, Mr. Clarendon, who had long been wearied of the dull seclusion in which he thus passed so many years, removed with his two daughters to London, and in one of the Paradise Villas had they been located about eighteen months at the time when our tale opens.

But Mr. Clarendon was not now at home. Years had elapsed since he had made any effort to be reconciled to his proud relations, and, at last, — finding that his income was disproportionately small when compared with the claims that there were upon his income, especially with an augmenting taxation and the increasing dearness of provisions, — he had resolved to repair to Marchmont Castle, in Derbyshire, and endeavour to seek an interview with his noble cousin, its owner. Considering that his daughters had reached that age when they could take care of themselves during his temporary absence, Mr. Clarendon set out accordingly, and only two days had elapsed, since his departure, when the incidents which occupied our first two chapters took place.

Before, however, we resume the thread of our narrative, we must pause for a few moments to describe Octavia and Pauline Clarendon.

They were both tall, elegantly shaped, and possessing a maturity of charms which made them seem two or three years older than they really were, for at this time Octavia was twenty-one, and Pauline a month or two past nineteen. Their style of loveliness was pretty nearly the same, except that Octavia's hair was a rich auburn, and her sister's a dark brown; but their complexions were equally fair and beautiful, without spot or blemish, and reminding the beholder of the most delicate blending of the hues of the rose with the purity of the lily. Their foreheads were high and open, their mouths small, and with lips red and ripe as cherries, and their teeth of pearly whiteness. Their eyes were of dark blue, large and rolling, and at times expressing an involuntary tenderness that gave a voluptuous langour to the countenances of these charming sisters.

Octavia and Pauline were tall in stature, as we have already observed; but we might have stated that they were above the usual height of women. Indeed, they were finegrown girls, — and not merely beautiful, but handsome. Whom to prefer of the two, on the score of loveliness, it would have been difficult to decide; for if there were something more subdued and retiring in the blushing charms of Pauline, yet it was impossible to gaze without the tenderest emotions on the more imposing and queenly beauty of Octavia, especially when the light, playing upon the rich redundancy of her auburn hair, seemed to crown its glossy surface as with a glory.

And Octavia knew that she was beautiful; her gait, her demeanour, her carriage, all denoted a consciousness that she was the object of admiration. Nor less was Pauline gifted with the same vanity, but it displayed itself less, or, rather, was more subdued by the bashfulness attendant on a tenderer age.

The sisters were much attached to each other, and loved their father with the sincerest affection. Though a disappointed, crushed, and dispirited man, he had behaved kindly toward them, and they fully comprehended all the sacrifices he had made to rear them genteelly. They accordingly repaid him with the most solicitous attention to all his wants and wishes; but we must mention, as a good trait in their character, that they never sought to gratify their vanity by extravagance in dress. They moreover devoted so much care to the domestic affairs, and managed with so much economy, that no regular servant was kept; the occasional attendance of a charwoman was all that was needed to assist them in maintaining the little dwelling in the best possible order.

We have enabled our readers to form a tolerably correct idea of the two young ladies who are destined to play no inconsiderable part in our narrative, of which we now resume the continuous thread.

It was verging toward eleven o'clock on the evening of Mr. Page's adventures, when a tradesman from the neighbourhood knocked at the door of the cottage inhabited by the Clarendon family, and Octavia answered the summons. The man left some article which had been ordered, and, having apologized for calling so late, took his departure. The young lady then tripped lightly down the gravel walk of the little garden in order to lock the front gate, and at that instant a gentleman in a cloak, who had just alighted from a hackney-coach precisely opposite, hurried up to Miss Clarendon, saying, " Permit me to step in and rest myself for a few minutes."

Had she paused for a single instant to reflect upon this request, she would have at once seen that it was of so extraordinary a nature, coming as it did from a perfect stranger and at such a time of night, that nothing but a prompt refusal could consistently and properly meet it, but its very strangeness, and the abruptness with which it was made, so completely confused, or rather bewildered the young lady, that she held the gate open with her fair hand, and the gentleman, taking this as a proof of assent, hurried into the house.

Scarcely, however, had he thus glided past Octavia, when she was struck with the impropriety of which she had been guilty, and hastened after him. On entering the villa, she mechanically closed the door behind her; and as all this was the work of a few moments, the driver of the yellow coach did not in reality perceive which way the gentleman had so suddenly disappeared.

Pauline was seated in the little front parlour, which was very neatly furnished, and lighted with a lamp, and the supper, consisting of a cold joint, was upon the table. The young lady was both astonished and alarmed when she heard the heavy steps of a man rush into the house, and she started from her chair with an ejaculation of terror.

The stranger entered the parlour, and seemed immediately struck with the exquisite beauty of Pauline Clarendon, and he had scarcely given utterance to a few words of apology for his abrupt intrusion, when Octavia made her appearance.

If the gentleman in the cloak had been seized with admiration of the younger sister, he was now positively amazed at the queenlike loveliness of the elder; but almost instantly perceiving the awkward position in which he stood with regard to these young ladies, and the embarrassment which they experienced at this adventure, he hastened to give some explanation which might relieve them from so unpleasant a feeling.

" I am well aware, charming ladies," he said, in a smooth and courteous tone, and with a fascination of manner which almost immediately disarmed them of any resentment which his intrusion had excited, " I am well aware that my conduct must appear most rude, most ungentlemanly, most unjustifiable in your eyes, but I trust that you will give me leave to rest myself for a few minutes; and in the meantime I shall be enabled, I hope, to satisfy you that I am incapable of offering you a wanton insult."

While he was uttering the last words of his speech, Octavia exchanged with her sister a hasty glance, which showed that the same thought had simultaneously struck them both;

namely, that it would be impossible to refuse the slight hospitality which was solicited.

The elder Miss Clarendon accordingly sat down, an example which Pauline immediately followed; and the gentleman, understanding the tacit assent thus conveyed, threw off his cloak and took a chair. The brief pause afforded by these little arrangements gave him an opportunity of thinking of some excuse that might account for his extraordinary intrusion and enlist the sympathies of the young ladies at the same time; for he was suddenly seized with the desire to cultivate the acquaintance of the two most charming creatures he had ever encountered in the course of his life.

On their side, they could not help observing that their strange visitor was not only of very handsome appearance, but likewise of polished manners, and that there was about him an air of refinement far superior to anything they had before met with in their short experience of the world. In fact, the sisters were both prepossessed in his favour, and when he resumed the conversation, they were fully prepared — though involuntarily — to accept any reasonable excuse which he might offer for his conduct.

" Feeling that the most ample explanation is due to you, ladies," he said, " I must begin by stating that I am a gentleman of some property, and that my name is Harley. It may be that I was foolishly good-natured; it may also be that I was deceived by a villain; but certain it is that I gave my security to a large amount on behalf of a person who called himself my friend, and this individual has absconded. Young ladies of your age, and dwelling in a genteel seclusion, — if I may be allowed to form an opinion of your habits from the favourable impression you have made upon me, — are not likely to be well acquainted with the proceedings of that dreadful pestilence called law, but you may probably have heard or read enough to understand that a person in my position becomes liable to have his freedom most disgracefully molested by certain human sharks known as bailiffs. Such is my present state; and it was in flying from those malignant enemies that I was audacious enough to seek refuge in the first house whose friendly door stood open."

This statement was delivered in a tone of semi-jocularity which put the young ladies into a very good humour with Mr. Harley, and another interchange of glances convinced each sister that they were both animated with the same inclination to render all possible service to a gentleman who had suffered so cruelly in aiding a friend. Octavia accordingly expressed the pleasure they felt in being able to afford him a refuge, and concluded a few brief and modestly delivered observations by offering him some refreshment, at the same time apologizing for the frugal nature of their fare.

Mr. Harley, who, as a man of the world, saw that the acceptance of the proposal would naturally place him upon a more friendly footing with the sisters, responded in the affirmative; and now, while Octavia hastened to arrange a knife and fork and clean plate for the guest, Pauline tripped lightly down into the kitchen, returning presently with a jug of foaming table-ale, which she placed on the board. Mr. Harley apologized for giving so much trouble, whereupon Octavia informed him, with a modest dignity truly captivating, that they were accustomed to wait upon themselves, as their circumstances did not permit them to keep a servant, and they could therefore well attend upon their guests. This avowal was turned to advantage by Mr. Harley, who paid the sisters a flattering but delicate compliment upon the praiseworthy qualities which were thus revealed to him, and he dexterously suffered them to understand that he himself was a stranger to the happiness of a sweet domesticity, being as yet unmarried.

As the conversation progressed, he learned that the sisters were alone together in the house, and that their father had gone into Derbyshire. They also, in the artlessness of their character, made him acquainted with the reasons of this visit and the hopes that were entertained of their parent being able to effect a reconciliation with his noble relative. Mr. Harley expressed an earnest desire that the journey might be crowned with success; and in all he said there was an apparent sincerity which still further increased the favourable opinion already formed of him by his beautiful hostesses.

Indeed, an hour had passed away so pleasantly that the young ladies had not once thought of the lapse of time, until the clock in the passage proclaimed midnight; and then, suddenly made aware how late it was, they glanced somewhat uneasily at each other. Mr. Harley rose immediately from his seat, and resuming his cloak, was about to express his gratitude for the hospitality he had received, when a sudden crash in the road, just opposite the house, and which was instantaneously followed by the plunging of horses, the screams of ladies, and the ejaculations of postboys, startled the inmates of the comfortable little parlour.

CHAPTER IV

THE ACCOUCHEMENT

THE sounds which thus appeared to promise a new adventure were occasioned by the sudden breaking of the fore axle of a travelling barouche, which was whirling along the road as speedily as four spanking horses and two expert postilions could carry it.

Mr. Harley instantly rushed forth to offer his assistance to the ladies whose screams had emanated from the vehicle; while Octavia and Pauline followed as far as the garden gate, to render their aid if necessary.

The scene in the road was one of the utmost confusion and terror, for the postilions were occupied in endeavouring to quiet their horses, which were plunging frightfully; a valet in plain clothes had been thrown from the box, and, pitching on his head, lay stunned within a few feet of the broken vehicle; a lady's-maid, who was seated on the same dangerous eminence, was clinging to the rails which she had clutched just in time to save herself from a similar accident; and two ladies inside were shrieking for help.

Mr. Harley's first impulse was to drag the valet away from the dangerous vicinity of the horses' hoofs; and a rapid glance by the aid of the pure moonlight enabled him to perceive that the man was not killed, and was indeed already regaining his senses. Mr. Harley then assisted the lady's-maid, who was half-dead with terror, to descend from her critical position on the box; and, having thus ensured her safety, he opened the door of the barouche to afford egress to the two ladies.

All this had been the work of less than half a minute; but scarcely had Mr. Harley obtained a glimpse of the countenance of the lady who was farthest from the side of the vehicle where he stood, when he uttered an ejaculation of amazement, and, darting away behind the barouche, disappeared in a few moments.

The ladies themselves were too much terrified to notice his features when he had approached the door to open it; and now, hastily precipitating themselves from the interior, they were received in the arms of Octavia and Pauline. For the sisters, perceiving the sudden flight of Mr. Harley, sprang forward to succour those whom he had thus unaccountably abandoned.

One of the ladies was apparently about eighteen or nineteen, the other was upwards of ten years older; and it was the former whose countenance had produced so strange an effect upon Mr. Harley.

The sisters instantaneously conducted these two ladies into their parlour; and the younger one, sinking upon a chair, moaned and writhed as if in great pain. The elder lady appeared to be seized with a sudden consternation at beholding these symptoms on the part of her companion; but almost immediately recovering her presence of mind, she turned toward the sisters, exclaiming, in a tone of hurried though fervent appeal, " For the love of God, young ladies, assist my suffering friend to a bedroom, — she is about to become a mother! "

This intelligence, startling though it were, was sufficient to excite all the generous sympathies that dwelt in the bosoms of the sisters, and they hastened to comply with the urgent request, while the elder lady rushed back into the road to give certain instructions to the postilions and the servants.

By this time the valet had recovered his senses and was slowly approaching the house, leaning on the arm of the lady's-maid, who, as we have already intimated, was more frightened than hurt.

The elder lady's orders were rapidly and imperiously given.

" Matilda," she said, addressing herself to the female, " hasten to rejoin your mistress, who is seriously indisposed; " and as she uttered these words, she darted upon the abigail a glance of deep meaning, which the clear moonlight prevented from being either lost upon her or misunderstood. Matilda, accordingly, hurried into the house.

" Pembroke," said the lady, now speaking with equal rapidity to the valet, " you must get those postilions away and all traces of the accident removed as speedily as possible. Reward the men liberally, — and see that the occurrence is kept as quiet as it may be. Having done this, you must take a lodging for yourself in the neighbourhood; and let me know your address — by letter, mind — in the course of to-morrow, so that I may be enabled to convey further instructions to you. You can direct to me in the name of — let me see? — oh! Mrs. Smith; and a glance will inform you presently the number of this house and the name of the place or terrace or row where it is situated."

The valet received these instructions with a low bow; and the lady, whom we shall now denominate Mrs. Smith, — that being the nomenclature which had first suggested itself to her mind, — hurried back into the villa.

Ascending the bedroom whither her younger companion had been borne, she exclaimed, upon entering the chamber, "How does my dear Mrs. Mordaunt feel now?"

These words were uttered with a rapid and expressive glance at the lady's-maid, as much as to convey an intimation of the name by which the invalid was to pass; and the sisters were too much bewildered by this new adventure that had occurred to notice anything extraordinary in the way in which the question was put.

The invalid herself — whom we must call Mrs. Mordaunt — was in the incipient agonies of a premature childbirth, and too wretched in mind as well as too much anguished in body to notice anything that was passing around her. Mrs. Smith now implored Octavia to procure the immediate attendance of a medical man; and the young lady, throwing on her bonnet and shawl, hastened to comply with the request. Pauline quitted the chamber at the same time, and repaired to the parlour, where she awaited the return of her sister, who shortly reappeared, followed by a surgeon from the neighbourhood.

The medical gentleman thus summoned was about forty years of age, and tolerably handsome. His features were large and regular; but his countenance could not altogether be styled pleasing, inasmuch as there was a sinister expression in the eyes which, though scarcely definite enough to strike a superficial observer, would not have escaped any one of keener perception. It happened that he had only just returned home from the house of a patient when Miss Clarendon called; and he was accordingly dressed in his usual manner, which was with considerable neatness and precision, when he accompanied her to the villa. He was a person of few words, and never asked questions through motives of curiosity. So long as he was well paid, he saw things only with a professional eye; but he was avaricious, selfish, and of a money-making disposition. He was married to a lady who shared in his miserly propensities; and as they had no children, and his practice was extensive, they had contrived to amass a handsome independence.

Mr. Thurston — for this was the name of the medical gentleman — was introduced into the bedchamber where his services were required; and Octavia, having seen him as far as the door of that room, returned to her sister in the parlour.

" This is a night of adventures, Pauline," she observed, as she seated herself near the cheerful fire and warmed her hands, which were chilled with the nipping frost.

" But the present incident is more extraordinary, and also more unpleasant, than the former," returned the younger Miss Clarendon. " By the bye, did you notice how abruptly Mr. Harley took his departure? "

" I consider his behaviour to be most rude, most ungentlemanlike," said Octavia, with a strong emphasis on the epithets. " After the hospitality we afforded him, — and under such equivocal circumstances, too, — the least he could have done would — "

" Would have been to wish us good-bye," observed Pauline, finishing the sentence for her sister; and the two handsome girls pouted their pretty lips, — lips on which an Antony might have sealed the loss of the empire of a world.

" But do not let us think of Mr. Harley any longer," suddenly exclaimed Octavia, proposing, however, something to which she could not possibly settle her mind, inasmuch as the handsome person, the elegant manners, and the varied conversational powers of that gentleman had made a deep impression upon her.

" No, we will banish him from our memories," observed Pauline. " Indeed, we ought to think of the poor lady upstairs, whom the accident to the barouche will perhaps render prematurely a mother."

"And she is of course totally unprepared for such an event," said Octavia. "I will steal gently up to the room, knock at the door, and inquire if we can possibly be of any service — "

"Do so, dear sister," interrupted Pauline; "for I can assure you that Mrs. Mordaunt's beautiful countenance, though convulsed as it was with suffering, completely prepossessed me in her favour. These ladies are evidently rich: did you observe what magnificent furs they wore, and what costly jewelry they had about their persons?"

"Yes, they are both handsomely dressed and very superior in their manners," said Octavia. "They moreover travelled in good style — a barouche and four, with a valet and a lady's-maid; and yet they could not be going to a great distance, for they do not appear to have had any boxes or portmanteaus with them."

"The same circumstance struck me just now," remarked Pauline. "In my opinion, they are people of rank travelling *incognito*. Such things are done, you know, dear sister. At all events, the barouche was a plain one, without any arms upon the panels — "

"And the valet was not in livery," added Octavia. "But while we are wasting time by chatting in this manner, as if nothing unusual were going on in the house, the poor lady may require our services in some way or other."

Scarcely were these words uttered, when the door opened and Mrs. Smith made her appearance.

"My dear young ladies," she said, "I know not how to thank you sufficiently for your kindness toward my bosom friend, Mrs. Mordaunt. I feel deeply all the generosity of your conduct; and — pardon me for making such an observation — but rest assured that it shall not go unrewarded."

"Oh, madam!" ejaculated Octavia, the blood rushing to her cheeks, "though we are poor, we are not mercenary — "

"I know it, my sweet girl," interrupted Mrs. Smith, in a kind and conciliatory tone; "nevertheless, there are means of proving one's gratitude in a substantial manner, and yet so delicately as to give no offence. However, we will not say any more upon that subject at present; for I have yet another favour to solicit — "

"Speak, madam — speak," cried Octavia; "anything that we can do to serve yourself or your friend shall be done cheerfully."

" My request is that you will show our female attendant, Matilda, the way to the surgeon's house," answered the lady. " Mr. Thurston himself — for such I understand to be his name — is unable to quit his patient up-stairs; and he has written a short note which must be immediately forwarded to his wife, in order to procure certain little articles absolutely necessary under present circumstances. But as Matilda is quite ignorant of the neighbourhood, and as we certainly cannot think of suffering you to go out any more alone at so very late an hour — "

" I am ready, madam," exclaimed the good-natured Octavia, hastily resuming her bonnet and thick shawl, which she had laid aside in the parlour on her return from the previous visit to the surgeon's.

The lady's-maid was thereupon summoned; and Octavia, once again daring the piercing chill of the night, conducted the dependent to Mr. Thurston's residence. Mrs. Thurston was in bed; but a servant speedily answered the door, and admitting Miss Clarendon and Matilda into a parlour, took the note up-stairs to her mistress.

We should here observe that the surgeon and his wife were in the habit of receiving at their house ladies who were in a way to become mothers, and who had special reasons for retiring into a strict seclusion during the period of their confinement. A good supply of baby-linen was therefore constantly kept ready by the thrifty and money-making Mrs. Thurston; and it was for articles of this kind that Matilda had been sent with the note. The surgeon's wife, presuming from the nature of her husband's note that he had in hand a case that was likely to prove lucrative, manifested no displeasure at being summoned from her warm couch, but rose immediately and packed up a quantity of baby-linen in the course of a very few minutes. The servant delivered the parcel to Matilda, who, thus provided, returned with Octavia to the villa.

The lady's-maid was a shrewd, cautious, and reserved young woman, of about five and twenty. She was tolerably good-looking, well educated, and of superior manners for her position; in fact, she was the daughter of a poor curate in some remote district, and who, having a large family to support upon ninety pounds a year, while his rector had five thousand, was compelled to allow his eldest children to accept menial places in wealthy families.

During the walk to and from the surgeon's house, but a very few words were exchanged between Miss Clarendon and Matilda; and those were confined to observations of no particular interest.

We must now introduce the reader to the chamber where Mrs. Mordaunt was lying in the pangs of maternity, with the surgeon on one side of the bed and Mrs. Smith on the other.

The young lady who was thus about to become a mother was, as we have already stated, about eighteen or nineteen years of age. She was tall and well formed, with a remarkably clear and beautiful complexion, large blue eyes, with dark fringes and brows delicately pencilled, lips that were the least thing coarse, but between which gleamed rows of pearl, and a nose and chin that were exquisitely chiselled in the purest classic style. Her luxuriant light brown hair now flowed in rich, curled, and wavy masses all over the pillow, and wantoned upon the bosom that was palpitating with the throes of both bodily and mental agony.

Mrs. Smith was likewise a handsome woman, of a style of beauty contrasting altogether with that which we have just described; for her hair and eyes were black, her complexion was of that clear olive, or rather bistre, which shows in its pure transparency the carnation hue of the warm blood, and her shape was slender, but admirably proportioned.

The surgeon had not been many moments in the chamber ere his quick eye perceived that Mrs. Smith wore a wedding-ring, whereas the lady who was called Mrs. Mordaunt, and who was about to become a mother, had upon her finger no such evidence of the marriage state. Mr. Thurston did not, however, appear to notice this fact; he saw, by the well-filled purse which peeped half-way out of a reticule that had been tossed on a chair, and by the handsome jewelry belonging to the ladies, that his bill was safe, — and that was sufficient.

After an absence of about twenty minutes, Matilda returned with the baby-linen; and her arrival at this instant was most opportune, for shortly afterward Mrs. Mordaunt became the mother of a male child.

CHAPTER V

MORNING IN LONDON — THE DISOWNED BABE

Cold, gloomy, and cheerless dawned the wintry morning, like a gray mist that struggles with slow and partial success against night's dark veil.

The frost had broken up suddenly, and was succeeded by a dampness of the atmosphere that hung like a thick and noxious vapour over the mighty metropolis.

The watercress girl, shivering in the scant clothing and with her naked feet and ankles of a livid red as if they were raw, could scarcely give forth the usual cry that proclaimed her presence, so spasmodically did her teeth chatter; and as the poor wretch dragged her weary form along, gazing anxiously at the house doors to see whether the servants were coming out to buy, each bleeding foot left its ensanguined trace on the pavement. Alas! unhappy creature, she had risen at five, and for three long hours that morning had she groped in the utter darkness and amidst the ponds and rivulets in the northern outskirts, for a few pennyworths of green sprigs that were to give a relish to breakfasts eaten in warm rooms and by cheerful fires! But not a morsel of bread had as yet passed her lips, and her hands and her feet were so numbed that they had lost all sense of feeling as she trod the damp pavement or doled forth her cresses.

Soon after this poor girl had passed along her usual beat, came the milkmaid with cheeks as red as if she were a forest hoyden, and with her buxom charms denoting by their round, plump, and swelling contours the enjoyment of a vigorous health. She was warmly clad, with a thick shawl over her shoulders, and good stockings, and lace-up leathern boots; and though she felt the cold, yet 'twas not with that shivering wretchedness and shuddering sensation of misery which convulsed the frame of the other. There was, moreover, a certain cheerful assurance in her strange and fantastic cry; and at each house where she stopped she had a pleasant remark to make and a kind greeting to receive.

Ten minutes afterward, the baker came shuffling along, with his basket slung to his back and containing the hot rolls enveloped in a blanket; while at the same time the bell of the muffin-boy thrilled through the damp and heavy air.

At this hour, too, might be seen the servant-maids sweeping out the dust at the front doors or scouring the steps, then pausing to nod to some acquaintance in the shape of a tradesman's assistant, passing by, or perhaps tripping down to the iron railings before the houses, just to exchange a few words of friendly gossip with each other.

Behold, likewise, the old charwomen bustling along to the places where they work, drawing their thin, scanty shawls as closely around their shivering forms as possible, gazing wistfully at the public-house as they pass it, and thinking how agreeable a dram would prove on such a miserable morning, and conning over the last bit of scandal which they have gleaned, in order to retail it anon with all the amplifications their ingenuity can devise.

Perhaps, too, at this hour, may be met two or three of the daughters of crime, — miserable specimens of the frail sisterhood, returning home to their wretched abodes after having passed the night in some house of infamy, with their finery all huddled on in a manner indicating that the care which presided over the toilet ere they sallied forth on the previous evening has not been observed in the hurried makeshift of the morning, — lost, degraded, health-shattered creatures, with the natural pallor or sallowness of their features fearfully visible even beneath the warm artificial complexion which rouge has given to them.

Yes, and at that period of general rising and breakfasting throughout all save the strictly fashionable quarters of the metropolis, the half-naked, shivering, squalid mendicant may be seen crawling, or perhaps shuffling along, with his shirtless breast all exposed to the bitter air, his hair damp as if he had slept in a field, or wandered all night about the streets, his shoulders thrown forward, and his lank arms drawn in tight against his sides, while one hand is clasped over the back of the other in the spasmodic convulsion of a chill that searches him through and through to the very marrow of his bones.

Nor less, at this same hour, soon after the dawn of the miserable winter's morning, is seen the starveling beggar-boy, — a lad of tender years, whose growth is stunted by misery, and whose frame is emaciated so that the ribs of his poor little sides may be counted; the friendless, parentless, and unprotected child, who seems to be the outcast of society; a filthy globule of the moral scum thrown up by the fermenting passions, interests, and selfishness of the great world of London; a miserable being whose existence is passed in the very gutter, or on the dunghill, or under hedges, and who is not even so enviable as those whose lot alternates between a flash-house and a prison; a poor doomed boy to whose ear it were a hideous mockery to breathe a word of religion, or of morality, or of the hopes and fears attendant on the Christian faith.

Yes, cold, gloomy, and cheerless dawned the wintry morning, as the beautiful sisters, Octavia and Pauline Clarendon, began to make preparations for breakfast. They had scarcely closed their eyes all night; but their cheeks glowed with the hues of health, and their spirits were gay and cheerful as they performed those domestic duties which they chose not to entrust to the charwoman, who had already arrived.

As Mrs. Mordaunt progressed well, Mr. Thurston had returned home at about two o'clock in the morning; and during his absence an earnest and most serious consultation had been held by the young mother and her friend, Mrs. Smith, relative to the disposal of the babe. At length they resolved that certain proposals should be made to the surgeon; and, accordingly, when he reappeared shortly after eight o'clock, Mrs. Smith sought an opportunity of speaking with him alone in a room adjoining the chamber of the invalid.

" Mr. Thurston," she said, " I wish to submit to your consideration a matter of vital importance — and yet I know not how to open the subject."

" Perhaps, madam," returned the medical man, " it will save you some embarrassment if I assure you that I have already formed a conjecture relative to the aim which you have in view."

" Indeed, sir! " ejaculated the lady, amazed at his keenness of perception. " You can guess, then, that — "

" That it is respecting the child," he added, fixing his dark eyes significantly upon her. " Be not afraid, madam, to explain your views. I am a man of honour."

" Then I can no longer hesitate to address you upon this delicate — most delicate subject," resumed Mrs. Smith, encouraged by the surgeon's words. " You doubtless observed that there was no wedding-ring upon the hand of my unhappy friend, and I need scarcely tell you that she has become a mother without being a wife! Oh, sir, the honour of an illustrious family is menaced — terribly menaced — "

" There are ways and means of covering female frailty with an impenetrable veil," interrupted the surgeon, in an emphatic tone.

" Ah! now I am still further encouraged to proceed," exclaimed the lady. Then, after a short pause, she said: " Will you take charge of that hapless babe, Mr. Thurston? Your recompense shall far exceed your most sanguine expectations."

" I will, madam," was the answer, instantaneously and unhesitatingly given. " But as this must be regarded as a mere matter of business, — a negotiation to be conducted with the utmost circumspection and prudence, — pardon me if I inquire what guarantee you can offer me for the fulfilment of any conditions that may be settled between us? "

" Listen attentively, sir," replied Mrs. Smith; " and ponder well upon all I am about to say. Upon receiving into your house that hapless child whom a mother's frailty compels her to disown, you must consider that it henceforth belongs to you. Adopt it as your own son, if you please, or bestow upon it any name you may think fit, and devise any tale which may appear to you most suitable to account to your friends for the fact of its being thrown upon your hands, — arrange all these details in your own way, but pledge yourself solemnly and sacredly never to take any steps to discover its parents. On these conditions the sum of ten thousand pounds — "

" Ten thousand pounds! " ejaculated Thurston, startled from his habitual equanimity and self-possession by the mention of such a princely amount, and half-fearful lest his ears should have deceived him.

" Yes, ten thousand pounds," repeated Mrs. Smith. " Will that sum suffice? "

" I accept the proposal, with all the conditions you may annex to it," said Mr. Thurston, recovering his outward composure, although his heart was elate with an indescribable joy.

" You will undertake, then, to preserve an inviolable secrecy regarding what little you already know or what more you may suspect in reference to the mother of that child," resumed Mrs. Smith. " I mean that, should you meet her hereafter you will not attempt to recognize her, wherever that encounter may take place, and under whatever circumstances."

" I assent to all this," said the surgeon; " and I swear most solemnly to observe the compact."

" The same condition which I last stipulated applies to myself," continued Mrs. Smith. " Wherever and whenever you may happen to meet me, we must be strangers — total strangers to each other."

" All shall be as you propose, madam," returned Mr. Thurston. " Have you any further instructions? "

" None," replied the lady. " This evening the money shall be paid to you, and at any risk to herself I must remove my unhappy friend to-morrow."

" To-morrow! " exclaimed the surgeon. " Consider, madam, the weather is inclement, it is in the depth of winter — "

" But the case is urgent, sir," interrupted Mrs. Smith, in a tone which cut short all further remonstrance on the part of the medical man.

Thus terminated the colloquy; and when they retraced their way to the bedchamber, Mrs. Mordaunt instantaneously perceived by her friend's countenance that she had effected an arrangement with the surgeon.

After breakfast Mrs. Smith had obtained writing-materials from the sisters and immediately penned the following letter:

" ——— was prematurely delivered of a male child last night. The infant lives, and is pronounced by the medical man to be healthy. Arrangements have been made in a satisfactory way relative to the disposal of the babe. Circumstances, which I cannot possibly pause to detail, favoured the secrecy of all that has occurred; and ——— is as well and in as good spirits as can be expected. I will write again in a day or two. We shall remove to-morrow to my seat in Herts.

"E. D."

This letter was addressed to "General Barth, Post-office, Weymouth," and, having carefully folded and sealed it, Mrs. Smith took it herself to a receiving-house in Oxford Street. Thence she proceeded in a hackney-coach to a banker's at the West End; and having there obtained a large sum of money, she visited a jeweller's shop, at which she purchased two handsome lady's watches and several other articles for the embellishment of the female toilet, the total cost amounting to about a hundred guineas.

Mrs. Smith then returned to Paradise Villas, and presented the jewelry to Octavia and Pauline. The young ladies, though much delighted with the gifts, which were at once tasteful, elegant, and handsome, at first objected to receive them on the ground that it appeared as if any little service which they had rendered might appear mercenary; but Mrs. Smith succeeded in overruling their scruples, by assuring them that the "trifles" she proffered were merely to be regarded as proofs of a sincere friendship.

This matter being arranged, Mrs. Smith hinted in a delicate way that, for certain reasons which she considered it unnecessary to explain, it would be better to keep the incidents of the past night as secret as possible; and the sisters readily promised to obey this injunction, observing, however, that they could not do otherwise than inform their father on his return of what had occurred. But they assured Mrs. Smith that he was by no means likely either to find fault with them for receiving the ladies into the house, or to mention the circumstances elsewhere.

These precautions being adopted, Mrs. Smith sent as soon as it was dusk for Mr. Thurston, who arrived shortly afterward. She then paid him the stipulated sum of ten thousand pounds; and the moment had now arrived for Mrs. Mordaunt to part with her child. The scene was a painful one; for although that infant was the living evidence of the young mother's frailty and the proof of her dishonour, yet did she already experience a parent's love for the innocent babe, and, contemplating it with mournful and passionate affection, her countenance was for a few instants animated with the blushful glow of strange inward exultation.

But, alas! she was compelled to resign the hapless babe to the care of strangers, — to separate from it, disowning it at once and for ever! The sacrifice was torturing to her soul, but there was no alternative, no choice; and when the child was gently taken from her by Mrs. Smith, the wretched parent covered her face with her fair white hands and burst into an agony of weeping.

In a few minutes the unconscious cause of all this mental suffering was carefully enveloped in thick shawls, and Matilda, bearing it in her arms, accompanied the surgeon to his own abode. On her return she was enabled to give the young mother the consolatory assurance that Mrs. Thurston had already provided a wet-nurse for the infant, and that every preparation had been made to give a suitable reception to the little stranger.

On the following morning, while it was yet dusk, a plain travelling-carriage drove up to the door; and Mrs. Mordaunt, well wrapped up to guard her as much as possible against cold, was conveyed into the vehicle. Mrs. Smith followed her, Matilda took her place on the box by the side of the valet Pembroke, who was in attendance, and the equipage drove rapidly away in a northern direction.

We should observe that the two ladies had not forgotten to express their gratitude to the sisters for the hospitality which they had experienced at the villa; and Mrs. Smith promised to call upon them as early as circumstances would permit.

CHAPTER VI

MR. PAGE AND MR. HODSON — THE BOW STREET OFFICER

We must now return to Mr. Page, whom we left at the George and Blue Boar, Holborn, just after he had been aroused from his slumbers by the addle-pated constables from Aylesbury.

Having hastily dressed himself, the commercial traveller descended in no very pleasant humour to the public-room, where he ordered breakfast; and as he happened to be the only person there at the time, he was thrown entirely on the companionship of his own reflections.

These were far from being of an agreeable nature. Indeed, Mr. Page was placed in a cruel embarrassment, from which he knew not precisely how to extricate himself; for it was certain that his employers, Messrs. Hodson and Morley, of Wood Street, would hear of his arrival in London, and they would think it very strange if he did not call upon them without delay. But how was he to make his appearance at their counting-house, and not offer to place in their hands the bills of exchange which he had received from their provincial correspondents? He dared not confess that he had been robbed of those documents; for even if Hodson and Morley did not suspect his honesty, they would be sure to blame his carelessness, and his discharge from their employment must inevitably follow.

What was he to do? He was more than half-inclined to keep away from Wood Street until the morrow, hoping in the meantime to recover his pocketbook; for it must be observed that he possessed a friend from whom he well knew he could borrow the fifty guineas requisite to redeem it, and he felt assured that the robber would keep to his agreement, the bills of exchange being of no possible value to him.

On the other hand, if he did delay his visit to the warehouse of Messrs. Hodson and Morley, he was certain to be questioned upon the subject; and a plea of temporary indisposition was not likely to avail him with gentlemen of such businesslike habits as his employers.

In a state of complete bewilderment did Mr. Page sit down to his breakfast. He inwardly cursed Sir Richard Stamford, the Aylesbury constables, the reward offered for the apprehension of the baronet, and the disagreeable individual whom he had encountered in the lane, and who delighted in the appellation of Joe the Magsman. Then, having thus profusely distributed his maledictions, Mr. Page concluded by d——g his own folly, and invoking sundry imprecations on his own eyes and limbs.

He was in one of those humours when nothing seems good to the appetite or satisfactory to the mind. He denounced the coffee as ditch-water, the bacon as musty, the eggs as tasting of straw, the butter as train-oil; and he was just inflicting a sassarara upon the waiter for not keeping up a cheerful fire, when the door opened, and, to the ineffable dismay of the commercial traveller, Mr. Hodson entered the room.

The senior partner in one of the largest commercial firms in Wood Street was a man of about fifty years of age, and was dressed in the fashion of what was the " old school " at that period. He wore powder and pigtail, a square-cut coat, knee-breeches, and gaiters, and a waistcoat with large flaps over the hips; a massive gold chain with a number of seals depended to his fob, and he carried a gold-headed cane in his hand. In person he was short and stout; his countenance, though with the roundness and redness usually indicative of good humour, was somewhat stern in expression; and his look was cold, businesslike, and even suspicious.

Such was the individual who now made his unwelcome appearance in the coffee-room; and the moment his eyes lighted upon Mr. Page, they remarked the confusion which suddenly seized upon that individual.

Affecting, however, not to notice the unaccount which the commercial traveller almost instantaneously endeavoured to veil beneath a forced composure, Mr. Hodson approached the table, and took a seat, observing, " How do you do, Mr. Page? I felt assured, from your last letter, that you would arrive in town yesterday evening; and as I was passing this way, I thought I might as well give you a call."

"Thank you, sir; I am really much obliged to you for this kindness, sir — very much obliged, sir," stammered the commercial traveller. "How is Mr. Morley, sir?"

"He is quite well," responded Mr. Hodson; "that is to say, well in health, Mr. Page, but in regard to spirits, I cannot give an equally satisfactory account."

"Indeed, sir?" exclaimed Page, interrogatively.

"The fact is," continued Mr. Hodson, "Berkeley and Trent have stopped payment, and the result is that our house experiences a very heavy loss."

"Berkeley and Trent of Friday Street, sir!" cried the commercial traveller. "I thought they stood A1 in the trade?"

"And so did we," observed Hodson. "The contrary, however, has been made sadly apparent; and this very day have we two of their bills thrown back on our hands."

"I — am extremely sorry to — to hear it, sir," faltered Page, now feeling convinced that his employers would require the documents contained in the pocketbook. "I hope that the loss does not put you to any serious inconvenience, sir?" he added.

"Why, I think we can get over it," answered Mr. Hodson, his countenance now relaxing into a species of grim smile; for the man was worth thousands, and could have stood up against the bankruptcies of a dozen correspondents or agents. "But we require at once all the securities we can get together, to pay into our bankers; and as I am going direct to them, I thought I might as well look in and obtain from you the bills which you received at Aylesbury and elsewhere, and of which you duly advised us."

Mr. Page poured the milk into the sugar-basin instead of his teacup, in the confusion which attended his endeavour to look unabashed; and then raising his eyes furtively toward his employer's countenance, he beheld that gentleman surveying him with an intensity which suddenly became exceeding painful to endure.

"And therefore," continued the merchant, "you may at once hand me over those bills; and you can call at your leisure in Wood Street to settle the other matters with Mr. Morley."

"Do you want the — the bills at once — I mean directly, sir?" stammered Page, wishing that the floor would open and swallow up either himself or his master, he did not care which at the moment.

"To be sure I do," was the answer, delivered with a mixture of indignation and amazement.

"Then, sir, I must throw myself upon your mercy," returned Page, a cold tremor coming over him, "for I shall not be able to give them to you until to-morrow morning — or perhaps to-night at ten o'clock."

"The devil you won't! — and why not?" ejaculated Mr. Hodson. "Come, sir — speak out at once! I see that there is some mystery in all this."

"There is indeed, sir," cried Page; "and I hope you will not be angry with me. But the truth is I was robbed —"

"Robbed!" repeated the merchant, now eying his traveller with unmistakable suspicion. "Then, why did you not tell the truth at once?"

"Because I was afraid of your being angry, sir," was the answer; "and I have every expectation of recovering the bills this night. The thief agreed to deliver them up on receiving fifty guineas; and he has made an appointment with me to that effect."

"And you will, of course, give him into custody?" said Mr. Hodson, not knowing precisely what to make of this story.

"I don't dare do it, sir!" exclaimed Page, with a strong emphasis. "The villain assured me that if I attempted anything of the kind, I should have a bullet through my head. Besides, he is not to come himself, but will send a young woman dressed in black."

"Justice cannot be thus cheated of its due, Mr. Page," observed the merchant, in a severe tone. "Granting all you have told me to be strictly true, there is a certain line of conduct to be adopted in this case, and which our duty to society renders imperative. Put on your hat, sir, and come with me."

The wretched commercial traveller dared not offer any objection to this command; and he accordingly followed Mr. Hodson, who strode out of the hotel with all the purse-proud pompousness of his nature. The way that he took was the most direct to Bow Street; and on arriving there, he requested an audience of Mr. Peter Grumley, who was one of the officers attached to the police-court and the most famous thief-taker of the day.

Being shown into a private room, Mr. Hodson and the commercial traveller were speedily waited upon by a middle-aged man, six feet in height, of large proportions, and evidently endowed with a herculean amount of strength. He was attired in a shabby style; but this was from habitual neglect, and not from necessity, as his calling was a most lucrative one. In his hand he carried a substantial stick or rather bludgeon; and his coat-pockets stuck out suspiciously as if they contained pistols.

This was Mr. Peter Grumley; and to him did the merchant unfold the purport of his visit. The officer listened with great attention — never once opening his lips until Mr. Hodson had concluded all he had to say.

" And this is the genelman which was robbed? " he at length observed, jerking the thumb of his left hand over his shoulder toward Mr. Page, who was standing a little in his rear; for the officer was sitting in a lounging manner upon the edge of a table.

" Yes, this is my commercial traveller," answered the merchant; " and he will give you any additional information you may require."

" Good and well," said Grumley, laconically. " Was you a-coming home in your vehicle? " he demanded, now turning round and taking a calm but lengthened survey of Mr. Page, who felt very uncomfortable indeed under the scrutiny.

" No — not exactly," was the reply. " I — I was on foot at the time. In fact, it was after I had put up my horse and shay at the George and Blue Boar."

" Well, and where did the robbery take place? " asked Grumley.

" In a dark and narrow lane leading out of the Edgeware Road — about a mile up, on the left hand."

" And what were you doing in such an out-of-the-way quarter with my property in your possession? " demanded Mr. Hodson, angrily.

Page saw that it was useless to attempt any further concealment of the real truth — especially as disagreeable suspicions might fall upon himself. He accordingly related, without more hesitation, all the particulars of his adventures on the preceding evening; and when he had told his story, he felt relieved of a heavy load.

" So it was the Magsman which stopped you — eh? " observed Mr. Grumley, in a musing tone. " You see it's all right and straightfor'ard enow, sir," he continued, turning toward Mr. Hodson; " and your traveller really has been robbed. I don't think he's told no lies about it," added the officer, expressing the opinion with as much coolness as if it were a high compliment paid to Mr. Page's honesty.

" What can be done in the case? " inquired the merchant.

" We must see," was the vague and general answer. " I've long been on the lookout for Joe the Magsman; but he's the cunningest dog in all London, as well as one of the most desperatest. As for the young woman he talks of sending to manage this business to-night, she's his mistress. The 'Gallows' Widow,' they call her, because her husband was hanged a couple of years or so back; and she's wore weeds ever since — not on account of any partickler love she had for him, but because black clothes makes one look more respectable and is a better dodge to carry on business in her line. It would be a blessed thing to break up the whole gang, for there's a lot on 'em as is in league with the landlord of the Beggar's Staff."

" I am sure that Mr. Page will render you all the assistance in his power," observed Mr. Hodson; " and in that case I can promise, both for 'self and partner, that his harum-scarum imprudence of last night shall be overlooked. It is a duty we owe to society, to lend a helping hand in exterminating such dreadful miscreants as these of whom you have been speaking."

" Well, if so be Mr. Page has pluck enough to enter into the business, we can manage it, I've no doubt," said Grumley, swinging one of his legs backward and forward, and surveying the movement with infinite complacency. " Be you agreeable, sir? " he asked, suddenly raising his head and fixing his small gray eyes inquiringly on the commercial traveller.

" Certainly he is," hastily exclaimed the merchant, without allowing the principal party concerned to speak for himself. " Are you not, Mr. Page? "

" Oh, decidedly, sir," responded this individual, summoning to his aid as much courage as he could command; although, in the secret recesses of his soul, he did not at all admire the prospect of placing himself in collision with Joe the Magsman and the Gallows' Widow.

" There's a hundred pound reward offered for the apprehension of the Magsman," observed Mr. Grumley, deliberately unrolling a bundle of bills printed in ominously large type, and displaying the one which related to a certain Joseph Warren. " A hundred pound to be got," he repeated; " and therefore me and Mr. Page will go sheers."

" That's businesslike," exclaimed the commercial traveller, his countenance brightening up at the prospect of a recompense for the risk he was about to encounter.

" Well, then," resumed Mr. Grumley, " you must keep the appointment punctual this evening; and when you meet the Gallows' Widow, you must tell her that you want to see Joe the Magsman about some partickler business, and that you're going on as far as the Beggar's Staff in Horslydown. If so be the Magsman is in the neighbourhood at the time, watching your interview with his woman, she'll most likely take you to him. If not, she'll say that you can go with her to the flash boozing-ken. But in any case you must go on to the Beggar's Staff; and then leave all the rest to me."

" Am I to go alone? " inquired Page, with some degree of surprise and dissatisfaction at the arrangements proposed.

" To be sure! " answered the officer. " Why, what a fool's trick it would be to make your appearance with a troop of constables at your back. The rascals would take the alarm, and in a few minutes they'd be nowhere. Don't be afraid, sir; assistance will be pretty nigh, I can tell you."

" Very good," remarked Page. " And supposing that I am introduced into the presence of this Magsman, as he calls himself, what excuse had I better make for wanting to see him? "

" Why, you'll tell him that you're in the employ of a very rich firm in the city, and that having made a mull of your accounts, you're grown desperate and don't mind helping to rob 'em," said the officer. " The Magsman will snap at the bait; and so, if we don't succeed in grabbing him to-night, we shall be preparing a plant to catch him in Wood Street. But you must mind and do it properly, or else the whole thing'll fail, and he'll grow cunninger than ever."

" I understand," observed Page, " and you may depend upon it that when I do enter into a thing, it is with determination to go on boldly."

" So much the better," exclaimed Grumley. " And now, genelmen, as my time is precious and I've got certain little arrangements to make for to-night, I'll say good-bye for the present."

Mr. Hodson slipped a few guineas into the officer's hand, and then took his departure, accompanied by Page.

CHAPTER VII

EVENING IN LONDON — THE GALLOWS' WIDOW

It was nine o'clock in the evening, and a misty rain was falling.

The lamps shone dimly, as if through a fog; the streets were covered with a slimy mud; and Father Thames rolled through the arches of London Bridge with a moaning sound.

The wayfarers in the streets hurried along in a manner which showed that they would not be abroad unless business or necessity compelled them. Those who had umbrellas were a trifle less sullen in looks than those who had none; and these latter appeared as miserable as scanty clothing, inclement weather, and the jostling of crowds on the filthy, slippery pavement could possibly render them.

Young seamstresses taking home the work which they had toiled hard to accomplish by a certain time, milliner-girls returning to their poor lodgings, women of pleasure in their flaunting garbs, contrasting so strangely with the aspect of the evening, poor men's wives going to purchase the frugal supper at some cheap shop, and old crones shuffling along to the public-house, — these were all mingled pell-mell in the myriad thoroughfares of the mighty metropolis, and the eye of the acute observer might single out each and assign her to the particular class to which she belonged.

Of the male sex there were the ill-paid and half-starved clerk, the artisan, wearied with his hard day's labour, the needy adventurer in his shabby-genteel suit, the small tradesman, running about to collect in a few debts for the purpose of meeting a payment on the morrow, the old libertine whom no weather could keep out of the streets when the frail sisterhood walked abroad, the young rake puffing his cigar and nodding familiarly to the loose females whom he passed, the drunkard reeling home from the tavern, and the shivering beggar gazing wistfully at the windows of the bakers' shops and the eating-houses.

Then, too, might be observed the pauper-woman with an infant in her arms and a little family of shoeless and stockingless children trooping along miserably behind her; here a ballad-singer, standing in the gutter, had collected a small knot of idlers; and there a costermonger was pushing along his barrow, reckless of whose shins he might bruise or break at the crossings.

Amidst the people thus passing to and fro in all directions might be observed the juvenile pickpocket, with rapid walk, as if intent upon gaining some particular destination, although in reality having no settled point in view; while the older thief sauntered more leisurely along, with his hands in his own pockets, as if he had not the slightest intention of dipping them into the pockets of others.

The shop-windows were all rendered dim by the rain that settled upon them; the coloured waters in the chemists' dispensaries reflected a sinister light upon the countenances of the passers-by; and the chains, watches, and earrings in the jewellers' windows shone like tarnished gold.

While the wealthy and the well-off were seated at home in their warm rooms and by their cheerful fires, how many thousands of houseless wretches were wandering about the wet streets, or crowding in gateways, or lying crouched up on the door-steps! In the mansions of the great there were luxuriously spread tables, the delicious viands being served up on silver, and the generous wines sparkling through crystal; and at the same time, and in the same city, children were crying for food in cold, damp, and wretched garrets. While the merchant sat down to his supper, rejoicing in the day's gains, which amounted to hundreds, the hard-working man was devouring a sorry crust, the thought that he had no employment for the morrow imparting bitterness to the sorry meal.

But let us return to our narrative.

It was, as we have observed, nine o'clock in the evening when Mr. Page, enveloped in a cloak, and with a thick shawlkerchief tied around his neck, reached that point whence Tooley Street branched off from the foot of Old London Bridge.

Being very cold, he entered a public-house to take a dram at the bar; and while drinking the same, his eyes happened to light upon the countenance of Mr. Grumley, who was seated in a corner, smoking a pipe, in a manner so free and easy that no one unacquainted with him could possibly have suspected that he had any important business in hand.

Giving a slight and rapid sign of intelligence to Page, the officer raised a pewter pot to his lips, and indulged in a long draught of porter; and the commercial traveller, understanding that the Bow Street functionary did not wish to be spoken to or in any way recognized, paid for his dram, and quitted the house.

Scarcely had he crossed the threshold when he observed a female attired in deep black within a few yards of him; and as she passed, she stared at him in a peculiar manner. The light of the tavern lamp, dim though it were, gave him a good view of her countenance, which, in spite of its paleness, retained the traces of great beauty. She was of middle height, thin, but not badly shaped; and when she had ceased to gaze so intently upon the commercial traveller, she suddenly assumed a demeanour so retiring and modest that a stranger would have taken her for the wife of a small tradesman or respectable mechanic.

Page felt convinced that this was the woman whom he had to meet; and he was hesitating whether to follow her or not, when she turned back, and as she repassed him, she again regarded him with a peculiar significancy.

" One moment, young woman," said Page, touching her upon the shoulder as she was walking rapidly on. " Are you looking for any one? "

" I have found something, and am in search of the owner," she replied, in a voice that was far from disagreeable, her lips at the same time revealing a very good set of teeth.

" Then I am the person you want," returned the commercial traveller; " and I have got fifty guineas to pay you."

" Who told you to meet me here, sir? " asked the woman, examining him attentively.

" A person called Joe the Magsman," was the immediate response.

" Good! " remarked the Gallows' Widow. " Follow me."

And thus speaking, she led the way into a narrow court forming the side entrance to a pawnbroker's shop; then, stopping short under a lamp over the door of that establishment, she said, " Give me the money," at the same time producing the much coveted pocketbook.

Page handed her a small canvas bag containing the gold; but before she parted with his property, she drew out a quantity of the money, examined the pieces with a keen though rapid glance, and having thus satisfied herself that they were genuine, gave him his pocketbook.

" You may open it, sir," she remarked; " and everything will be found quite safe. The bills were of no use to us."

The commercial traveller hastily inspected the documents; and perceiving that the woman had spoken the truth, he secured the pocketbook about his person. The Gallows' Widow was then about to take her departure; but Page stopped her, saying, " I want very much to see your friend the Magsman as early as convenient. Indeed, I did think of pushing my way as far as the Beggar's Staff this evening."

The female darted upon him a look of suspicion; but the commercial traveller kept his countenance admirably; and he saw her features gradually relapse into an expression of confidence.

" Well," she said, after a brief pause, " I am going that way, and so you can accompany me if you choose."

" Willingly," answered Page.

And away they went together.

Plunging now into the vile, filthy, and dangerous district on the southern bank of the Thames, — a neighbourhood which was lighted only by the shop-windows and not by street-lamps, — and unable to see his way clearly enough to avoid the pools of water and the heaps of mud which abounded in that locality, the commercial traveller walked by his companion's side, at first in profound silence. In fact, he had quite enough to do in endeavouring to pick his path; for at one moment he stumbled over a stone, at another he trod upon a dead dog, then he slipped into a hole, spattering himself even to the very countenance with slime, and next he was wading through a pile of filth accumulated at some corner. The farther he went, the darker became the neighbourhood; for the inhabitants were shutting up their shops, and the sky was so densely covered with clouds that not a glimpse of moonlight nor a single star relieved the obscurity of the scene.

Having proceeded some distance along Tooley Street, the Gallows' Widow turned up Mill Lane, Page still keeping by her side; and breaking the long silence which had prevailed, he observed, " This is a frightful neighbourhood."

" I dare say — to those who are not accustomed to it," replied the woman.

" But you seem to walk easily and comfortably enough without splashing yourself," said the commercial traveller.

" I know every inch of the way," was the answer.

Page wished that he did; but as such was not the case, he was compelled to make the best of it.

" Where are we going now? " he demanded, as his guide took a turning to the right.

" Along Pickled Herring Street," she responded.

In this thoroughfare the houses were all shut up; and it was only when a light gleamed from some window that Page could catch a glimpse of the principal features of the path which he was pursuing. That the Thames was close by he, however, knew, alike from his general acquaintance with London, and from the low moaning of the vast volume of water as it rolled onward in its mighty bed; and then it struck him how easy it would be for evil-intentioned persons to assail, rob, and murder the defenceless individual in that lonely district, and dispose of the corpse in the river that was so near at hand. Shuddering at this idea, he looked back to ascertain if any one resembling a constable was following; but the darkness was so intense that he could distinguish nothing even at a distance of three or four yards.

At length the young woman stopped at the corner of Horslydown, which is a street branching off to the right; and, hastily seizing the arm of her companion, she drew him into a deep doorway, saying, " We will remain here a few minutes, if you please."

" But for what purpose? " asked Page, astonished at the movement.

" Hush! " whispered the Gallows' Widow.

A profound silence now reigned, disturbed only by the gurgling of the adjacent waters as they broke against the piles of a wharf; but in a short time footsteps were heard approaching, and the woman again caught the commercial traveller by the arm to retain him in the doorway and impress upon him the necessity of keeping silence. Almost immediately afterward, the form of a man passed the place where they were concealed; and it was easy to judge by his footsteps that he turned the corner into Horslydown.

" We must remain a few minutes longer, if you please, sir," said the woman, in a whisper so low that had Page been a foot farther off he could not have distinguished the words that were thus uttered.

In a very short time another man passed the doorway, and likewise turned into Horslydown; and when the echoes of his steps had died away, the Gallows' Widow again requested her companion to stay a little longer in that recess.

It now struck Page that the two men whom he had seen pass that way were not altogether unconnected with the present adventure; in fact, he felt assured that they were constables on the watch. But, almost simultaneously with this idea, the suspicion flashed to his mind that the Gallows' Widow might be waiting in that dark concealment to ascertain if her footsteps were dogged; and a cold trembling came over him as he contemplated the perils which he was encountering, the desperate character of the man whom he sought to deliver into the hands of justice, and the horrible neighbourhood in which he was pursuing this dangerous course.

" What are you waiting for? " he suddenly demanded of his companion, in a whisper.

" Hush! — more footsteps are approaching," was the prompt reply, also delivered in a tone barely audible.

" But I do not choose — " began Page, his terror gaining upon him.

" Silence — or I will blow your brains out! " was the low but hasty and emphatic rejoinder; and at the same time the commercial traveller felt the cold muzzle of a pistol touch his cheek.

An appalling consternation seized upon him; and had he not been leaning against the wall in the deep doorway, he would have fallen to the ground. Another man passed along the street, and turned into Horslydown.

" We will remain a little longer," said the woman. " But if you dare move or make a noise I shall instantly suspect some treachery, and I will put a bullet into you with as little ceremony as if you was a mad dog that had bit me."

As she spoke she withdrew the pistol from its alarming contact with the commercial traveller's face; but at the same instant its ominous click fell upon his ears, as if to warn him that the Gallows' Widow did not waste her words in idle threats.

He was horror-struck at the ferocious character which the woman had thus displayed so suddenly. Her pale, pensive, and even mild countenance appeared totally incompatible with such a daring and desperate spirit; and her manner was so reserved and subdued that it seemed impossible for her disposition to arouse itself to such a terrible energy.

While Page was making these reflections, which stole upon him in spite of the alarm that he now experienced, nearly ten minutes had elapsed; and during that interval not another soul had passed along the street.

" We will go now," said the Gallows' Widow, at last.

They accordingly emerged from their place of concealment, and turned into Horslydown.

Page was more than half-inclined to give his companion the slip and rush away as quickly as his legs might carry him; for he did not at all admire the circumstances which had just occurred. But no sooner had the thought of escape risen up in his mind, when innumerable reasons suggested themselves against it. He dreaded the wrath of Mr. Hodson, he feared to lose his employment in that individual's service, he longed to gain a share of the reward for capturing Joe the Magsman, and he trembled lest his formidable female companion should send a bullet whizzing after him, were he to raise her suspicions by attempting to decamp.

But he was still balancing which course to pursue, when the woman suddenly observed, " Here we are," and as she pushed Page gently on in front, he mustered up all his courage and entered the notorious boozing-ken.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BEGGAR'S STAFF

In a long, low, and ill-lighted room a number of men and women were seated at tables, some of them engaged in eating their suppers, and all having drinking materials before them.

Though the weather was so cold without, an intense heat pervaded this place; for at one end was a fire which blazed from an enormous kitchen grate half-way up the wide-mouthed chimney. The cloud of tobacco smoke which spread like a haze throughout the apartment, and appeared to hang like a mass of dingy drapery to the ceiling, augmented this heat, and produced a stifling sensation in Page's throat. The vapour appeared to be of a darker hue in consequence of the blackness of the ceiling and the walls, which were seen dimly through it; while the floor was so begrimed with dirt that it seemed as if the cleansing effect of water was unknown at the Beggar's Staff.

On the side of the room nearest to the street there was a long and very narrow window, covered with a blind of baize which once was green, but had completely faded into a dirty brown. On the opposite side was a semicircular counter, or bar, behind which an open door afforded a glimpse of a little den, denominated " the parlour."

Within the bar stood a fat, burly, red-faced man, with a dirty cotton nightcap upon his head and a short pipe in his mouth. Having thrown off his coat in consequence of the heat, he was now in his shirt-sleeves; and his linen was certainly the foulest ever thus displayed. His countenance was sinister and forbidding; and his bloated appearance indicated that he was no indifferent admirer of his own liquors.

This individual, we need scarcely observe, was the landlord of the Beggar's Staff; and though his name was in reality Stephen Price, as proved by the inscription on the sign in front of the house, his customers invariably denominated him " the Big Beggarman."

He was assisted in his occupation at the bar by his daughter, a young woman of eighteen or nineteen, and whose forbidding features contrasted strangely in their vixenish sharpness with the coarse and bloated countenance of her sire. She was dressed in a very slovenly manner; her flaming red hair was in such disorder that it looked for all the world as if she had been creeping through a bush, and her face and hands appeared to have had a desperate quarrel with soap and cut it accordingly. Her gown was open in front, displaying her scraggy neck and chest, for she was as flat in respect to bosom as one of the opposite sex. Her Christian name was properly Mary; but the sobriquet by which she was commonly known was either " Carrotty Poll," or plain " Carrots."

The wall behind the bar was arranged with shelves, whereon stood a variety of drinking vessels, bottles of ardent spirits, jars of tobacco, and plates and dishes, these last being for the accommodation of those customers who cooked their own meals at the huge fire blazing in the grate. Within the bar, and raised upon trestles of rough-hewn timber, were two vast barrels, one of porter, the other of ale; for the apparatus whereby malt liquor could be drawn from the cellar into the bar was not as yet invented.

Over the little door which has already been mentioned as leading into the parlour was painted, or rather scrawled with a paint-brush, the ensuing doggerel:

" All them as comes to ask for beer,
Must tip the ready rhino here:
For pipes and bakker please to pay
Afore you takes the things away; —
For bingo and blue ruin too
Naught but the stumpy down will do:
Short reckoning makes long-standing friends —
While tick in strife and trouble ends.
And when you go, I hope you'll not
Walk off with glass or pewter pot."

The rules and recommendations laid down in this precious composition would not have appeared unnecessary or misplaced in the eyes of any one who studied the aspect of the company present; for a more villainous and repulsive assembly of human beings it would be difficult to conceive.

Rascality and dissipation characterized the countenances of the men, profligacy and debauchery marked those of the women. Many of both sexes were in rags, others were more comfortably attired, and a few were flashily dressed. But the unmistakable stamp of inveterate vice and loathsome immorality was upon them all; and if any doubt as to their principles had existed in the mind of a person entering upon that scene for the first time, the conversation which was going on would have cleared up all uncertainty in a very few moments.

The women positively appeared anxious to outvie the men in the horrible nature of their oaths, the disgusting obscenity of their jests, and the coarse frankness with which they glorified in their profligacy. Some of the younger females assumed the most lascivious attitudes, in order to wheedle the men out of their money or induce them to expend it profusely.

When Page first entered the room, preceding the Gallows' Widow in the manner already described, he could scarcely distinguish any object through the dense cloud of tobacco smoke; but in a very few moments the persons present and the features of the place developed themselves rapidly, the same as the ships of a fleet stand out in bold relief as the smoke of their cannon rolls away. In this case, however, the smoke did not dissipate; but the eyes of the commercial traveller grew accustomed to it, and when the scene became fully apparent, his first impulse was to turn aside in loathing and effect a rapid retreat. But the remembrance of the Gallows' Widow's pistol, and a sense of the imprudence of exciting her suspicions, or of strengthening them if she already entertained any with regard to the object of his visit to the Beggar's Staff, — all this flashed to his mind and prompted him to assume as courageous an air and as unembarrassed a demeanour as possible.

The Gallows' Widow, on her entrance, was warmly greeted by several of the men and women present; and one or two, drawing her aside, spoke to her in whispers, their manner indicating that they were asking questions relative to her companion. Her replies were evidently satisfactory, though hurried; and, beckoning Page to accompany her, she conducted him straight up to the bar. Carrotty Poll obligingly opened the little gate or door which closed the barrier at the side; and the Gallows' Widow, exchanging a familiar nod with that female, entered the parlour, followed by Page.

The Big Beggarman attended upon them, closing the door behind him; and the commercial traveller now found himself in a little room, scarcely large enough to hold six persons, and dimly lighted by a single candle. The walls were black with smoke and dirt, the floor was strewn with sand, and the scanty furniture was old and rickety. A small, low door stood at one end of the place.

" Well, what news, my beauty? " demanded the Beggarman, addressing the Gallows' Widow in a familiar tone; " and who is this swell cove? " he inquired, glancing toward the commercial traveller.

" The affair of the pocketbook," was the Gallows' Widow's laconic answer as she took a seat.

" Ain't it settled, then? " asked the landlord.

" Yes; and the gentleman wants to see my man," responded the female. " But to speak candidly, I am suspicious — I am afraid there is something wrong; and therefore we had better question him first."

" Oh, that's it — eh? " exclaimed the Beggarman; and taking up the candle, he held it close to the countenance of the commercial traveller, saying, " If so be he means treachery, I shall see it depicted in his wisage — and then I'm blowed if we don't make a stiff 'un of him in no time."

This menace caused Page's blood to run cold in his veins; but, arming himself with the courage of desperation, and to some degree sustained by the idea that succour was at hand in case of emergency, he underwent the scrutiny of the landlord without moving a muscle of his face. Indeed, he returned the stare of the man with a steady look of calm defiance, and passed through the ordeal in a way which was positively astonishing to himself.

" It's all right, or I'm deucedly deceived," exclaimed the Big Beggarman, at length replacing the candle upon the table. " But we'll see what the niblike cove has to say for himself. First, howsomever, I suppose he'll stand a bottle of wine?"

"With great pleasure," observed Page, thrusting his hand into his pocket.

"Port — eh?" said the landlord.

A sign in the affirmative was made by the Gallows' Widow, to whom the query was addressed; and the Big Beggarman speedily produced the wine. Then, having placed glasses on the table, he took a chair, bidding Page imitate his example.

"And now, my good sir," said the bloated fellow, after having filled the glasses, "you will perhaps taste the lush and then favour us with an explanation relative to this wisit."

"The wine is good," observed the commercial traveller, setting down the glass which he had emptied, and paying a compliment to the port which it was far from deserving. "But to come to business, I must ask what guarantee I have that you won't peach against me for anything I am going to say, supposing you and your friends refuse to join in the matter."

"This isn't the shop where it's necessary to put such questions, my good gentleman," responded the Beggarman. "Three inches of cold steel under the ribs is the reward we give for treachery, and as the Thames runs pretty handy, there's no difficulty in disposing of the dead 'un."

"Well, I will trust you," said Page, who had appeared to hesitate only for the purpose of giving a better colour to the part he was playing. "The truth is, I'm a commercial traveller — "

"In the employ of Hodson and Morley of Wood Street," interrupted the Beggarman; "and your name's Page. Go on."

"How did you know all that?" demanded the bagman, in astonishment.

"The pocketbook was our authority," answered the landlord. "What! do you suppose we didn't overhaul it while it was in our keeping?"

"Ah! — true!" ejaculated Page. "Well, the fact is that this affair of the robbery made my employers so cursed suspicious — as it naturally might — that they insisted on going into my accounts; and I wasn't very well prepared for the investigation."

" That's the case with a many of you bagmen," observed the landlord.

" Unfortunately it is," returned the commercial traveller. " You see we are naturally a jovial set, and when we get together — "

" Pray go on as quick as possible, sir," exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, in a tone of impatience.

" I beg your pardon for digressing," said Page. " To come to the point, then, I am placed in a very awkward predicament. My accounts are most disagreeably inaccurate, and I stand a chance of having to give an explanation to the Lord Mayor, and afterward to the Recorder of London, unless I can get together a couple of hundred pounds by the day after to-morrow."

" And so you think that it would be as well to finger some of your employers' hard cash, in order to pay them in their own coin? " observed the Beggarman. " I begin to twig, you see," he added, with a knowing wink.

" You're just right," responded Page " If I am to be transported, it may as well be for a burglary as for embezzlement — and that's the plain English of it."

" Spoken like a man! " cried the Big Beggarman, exultingly. " The thing's as clear as daylight," he added, turning toward the Gallows' Widow. " This gentleman will assist in robbing his employers; and therefore we must suppose that he is well acquainted with the place where they keep their cash and the probable amount that is to be got by the venture."

" I know that they never have less than seven or eight hundred pounds in the strong-box," said Page; " and I should not be fool enough to risk the matter unless I was convinced that success is certain."

" We may let him see the Magsman," observed the Gallows' Widow, in her abrupt, laconic way; for the suspicions which she had previously entertained were now almost completely dissipated. " Follow me, sir," she added; and rising from her seat, the woman opened the little door already mentioned.

" Take the candle with you, my gal," said the Beggarman. " I must remain at the bar; for there's no lack of customers to-night."

The Gallows' Widow took up the light, and began to ascend a staircase so steep and narrow that it was a wonder to Page how such a bloated personage as the landlord could ever force himself into so circumscribed a space; for that he was occasionally compelled to pass that way to the upper regions of the house, the commercial traveller naturally conceived.

The landing on the first floor was very small, and had two doors opening from it, but the woman, pausing not there, commenced the ascent of another flight as ladder-like as the former; and on reaching the top, she led the way into a large loft immediately beneath the angular roof.

Page looked rapidly around, in the expectation of beholding the Magsman; for as there appeared to be no other door than the one by which they had just entered the place, he, as a matter of course, presumed that they had reached their destination.

He was, however, mistaken.

Giving Page the candle to hold, the Gallows' Widow speedily removed a quantity of straw that was heaped up in one corner; and raising a trap-door, she commenced the descent of a flight of steps, bidding the commercial traveller to follow her.

He obeyed; but at this instant it struck him that should the Magsman suspect his treacherous purpose and seek to do him a mischief, how could he possibly summon the Bow Street officers to his assistance? — how were they to learn whither he had been conducted?

Again did a cold tremor come over him, but, experiencing a full sense of the necessity of maintaining his presence of mind, he summoned all his courage to his aid, and followed the woman with a firm step.

At the bottom of the stairs she threw open a door; and in another moment the commercial traveller was introduced into the presence of Joe the Magsman.

This redoubtable individual was seated in a small chamber, furnished in a far more comfortable style than the other portions of the house which Page had as yet seen; and the bed, which stood in an alcove, or deep recess, was clean and neat in appearance. The walls were papered, there was a thick curtain over the small window, and a piece of carpet was stretched upon the floor.

The Magsman was about forty years of age, — very tall, powerfully built, and remarkably broad across the shoulders. But his countenance was precisely that which a novelist would describe or an artist depict as belonging to a villain of the most desperate character. His coal-black hair was rough and coarse, his brows were thick and long, overhanging small and restless eyes, and his bushy whiskers encroached on his face even to the cheek-bones. He was dressed in a shabby and negligent manner; and when Page was introduced by the Gallows' Widow into his presence, he was lounging in an armchair, smoking a pipe.

"Ah! my fine fellow," he exclaimed, the moment the commercial traveller stood before him, "I needn't ask who you are, for I had a pretty good glimpse of your face last night in the lane. Sit down, my boy, and let us know what has brought you here. Lizzy, my dear," he added, turning toward the Gallows' Widow, "put the bingo out upon the table."

The woman produced a bottle of brandy and some glasses from a cupboard, and then took a seat near her paramour.

"I suppose it's all right about the pocketbook?" said the Magsman.

"Yes — and here is the money," returned the Gallows' Widow, handing the ruffian the bag of gold, which he tossed upon the bed. "This gentleman wishes some particular business to be done, and that is why I brought him. The Beggarman heard his story; and we agreed that he might be introduced to you without further delay."

"And what is the nature of the business?" demanded the man.

Page forthwith repeated the same tale which he had already narrated in the parlour below; and the robber listened attentively.

"Well, what do you think of this, Lizzy?" he said, turning toward his mistress, when Page had done speaking.

"I think that it is all straightforward enough, or else I should not have brought him up here," was the answer. "I must, however, observe that I did entertain certain suspicions before we entered the house; for, according to my usual custom when bringing a stranger here, I stopped, and made this gentleman stop also, in a dark place, just to ascertain whether anybody in the shape of an officer was dogging us. Three men passed by, one after another, and at short intervals; but it was too dark to form an idea what they were. They, however, all three turned into Horslydown, and I confess that I didn't like it. But it might have been a false alarm on my part; and the conduct of this gentleman has since made me think it was."

While the Gallows' Widow was speaking, the Magsman's eyes were fixed not exactly suspiciously, but searchingly, upon the commercial traveller, who sustained this steadfast, scrutinizing gaze without wincing.

The Magsman seemed satisfied; and Mr. Page, perceiving that the result was in his favour, felt more at ease.

" And how do you propose to carry this business into execution? " demanded the robber, after sipping his brandy and water in a leisurely way.

" Hodson and Morley's place of business is in Wood Street, as you know already," answered Page, " and Hodson lives on the premises."

" How many men are there in the house at night? " interrupted the thief.

" Three," was the response: " Hodson, a man servant, and the porter, who sleeps in the kitchen, a bed being made up for him on purpose."

" And of course he has firearms within reach? "

" Not that I know of. But there's a watchman in the street all night; he is paid by the inhabitants."

" And therefore he walks up and down," observed the Magsman, " so that while he's at one part of the street, we can be commencing operations in another."

" Exactly so," answered Page. " The cash-box is kept in an iron safe let into the wall in the counting-house, which is in the back wareroom; and there will be some trouble in picking the lock of that safe."

" Leave the matter to me," said the Magsman, in a tone of confidence. " D'ye think I'll have much trouble in opening it, Lizzy — eh? " he demanded, turning with a chuckle toward his mistress.

" Not much, Joe," she replied, laughing in a low, quiet manner which did Page harm to hear it; for he fancied that a woman who could laugh in that strange way was capable of any atrocity — there was something so unnatural in it.

" Where ought the entrance into the house to be attempted? " demanded the Magsman, after a brief pause.

"That is the difficulty!" exclaimed the commercial traveller, assuming a tone of vexation. "The front door is precious strong and well chained and bolted; and the shutters to the warehouse window are not a very insignificant barrier. If there was much noise made, the porter would be sure to wake up down-stairs."

"And there's no means of getting in at the back?" asked the robber.

"None that I know of," replied Page, purposely avoiding the creation of a suspicion by representing the business as one that had few difficulties in the way.

"Well, it must be attempted in front, then," said the Magsman. "We must manage to get down one of the shutters, take out a square of glass, shove in a boy to open the front door, and pop up the shutter again before the watchman comes along. The course is clear enough now; it is difficult and even dangerous, but a mere flea-bite to things that I have done in my time."

Here again the Gallows' Widow laughed in her quiet way, as if it were to herself.

"Well," resumed the Magsman, "so far we have settled the matter. Now, where do we meet to-morrow night at about a quarter to twelve o'clock?"

"Name your own place, and I will be there to a minute," answered Page, delighted to think that the interview was drawing to an end.

"There's a flash-house in Grub Street, called the 'Kinchin-Ken,'" said the Magsman, after a few moments' reflection. "You will be there at a quarter to twelve; and it would be well, perhaps," added the ruffian, "if you was to come in the shabbiest clothes you have."

"I will not forget," responded Page.

"Not in that slap-up cloak, mind," observed the Magsman; "but try and look as much like one of us as you can. The Kinchin-Ken is a noted house for young prigs, and there'll be a many there at the time; so that if you go amongst them in swell toggery it may be disagreeable."

"I shall bear in mind all you tell me," said Page, rising from his seat; and, having emptied his glass, he wished the robber a good night.

"Good night, my ben-cull," returned the man, extending his huge hand, which the commercial traveller was compelled to shake. Then, as Page turned toward the door, the robber said, in a low, hurried, and scarcely audible whisper to the Gallows' Widow, " Let one of the pals speel after the jagger and lear his lag."

The woman darted a look of intelligence at her paramour; and, taking up the candle which she had brought with her, followed Page from the room.

They ascended the flight of steps leading to the loft; and there the woman replaced the trap-door, which she covered with the straw. Thence they retraced their way to the little parlour down-stairs; and Page, having wished the Big Beggarman, his daughter, and the Gallows' Widow good night, issued in safety from the Beggar's Staff.

But scarcely had he proceeded ten yards up the street, when a man darted from the establishment, crossed over the way, and, keeping in the black shade of the houses on that side, cautiously dogged the steps of the commercial traveller.

This individual pursued his way, quite unconscious of being thus watched, and wondering why Mr. Grumley and his men had remained so quiet, — a circumstance which he did not, however, regret, inasmuch as it had prevented a conflict wherein he himself might have been either killed or seriously injured. On reaching the corner of Horslydown, he turned into Pickled Herring Street, when some one, emerging from the very recess where he and the Gallows' Widow had concealed themselves on their way to the Beggar's Staff, said, in a low and hurried tone, " Is that you, Mr. Page? "

" Yes," responded the commercial traveller, startled by the abruptness of the incident.

" Then come here for a moment," resumed the man who had spoken; and he half-dragged Page into the recess, saying, in the same whispering tone, " Grumley set me here to watch for you. There's another of us out t'other end of Horslydown, and so we was sure not to miss you somehow. Grumley says the thing can't be done to-night, even if so be the Magsman is there, 'cause the place is too full. He must see you at the office in Bow Street in the morning."

" Very good," answered Page. " I have settled everything, and it's much better to put it off till to-morrow. The Magsman will then be sure to fall into our hands."

" That's all right," observed the officer. " We was afraid you'd be lurking about if you didn't meet any of us at once, and p'raps some of them prigs would have seen you. That's why we stayed to keep a lookout for you."

"Thank'ee for your kindness," responded Page. "I was indeed wondering why I didn't hear or see anything of you. Good night."

"Good night, sir," answered the constable; and they separated, the commercial traveller continuing his way along Pickled Herring Street.

But the whole of this colloquy was overheard by the spy set to dog Page's footsteps; and five minutes afterward every syllable was duly reported to those whom it concerned at the Beggar's Staff.

CHAPTER IX

MR. HARLEY

WE must now return to Paradise Villas.

Several hours had elapsed since the departure of Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. Smith, with their domestics, in the travelling-carriage; and the sisters were just sitting down to the afternoon repast in the back parlour, when a hackney-coach drove up to the door. A middle-aged man, dressed in black, with a white neckcloth, and having the appearance of a valet, or " gentleman's gentleman," hastily alighted; and while he quietly traversed the little garden and gave a loud knock at the door, the coachman took two or three small hampers out of the vehicle.

The charwoman having answered the summons, the individual in black requested to speak to Miss Clarendon; and he was accordingly shown into the front parlour, where the sisters immediately joined him.

" I have the honour to be in the service of Mr. Harley, ladies," said the valet, with a low bow and speaking in a tone of deep respect. " My master has directed me to call in order to apologize for his abrupt departure the evening before last, but the cause of which he will satisfactorily explain when next he has the pleasure of seeing you. He has likewise made me the bearer of some game and hothouse fruit, which he hopes you will condescend to accept; and, lastly, he has desired me to intimate that if you are likely to be perfectly disengaged this evening, he will do himself the honour of waiting upon you for an hour, in order to give those explanations to which I have alluded."

" You will have the kindness to give our respectful compliments to Mr. Harley," said Octavia, whose heart palpitated with a joy till then unknown, " and assure him that although we accept his handsome present through proper courtesy, we are nevertheless grieved that he should have endeavoured to make any return for such trifling hospitality as we were enabled to afford him. We are not aware of any engagement for this evening; but at the same time we must beg you to observe to Mr. Harley that it is quite unnecessary for him to take the trouble of calling merely for the purpose of explaining the motive of his sudden departure the other night."

" Your message, Miss Clarendon, shall be duly delivered," said the valet, with another low bow. " My master instructed me to inquire after the ladies who met with the accident in their travelling-barouche. He hopes — "

" They were fortunate enough to escape without injury," observed Octavia; " and they are no longer beneath our roof."

" Pardon me for having so long intruded upon you, Miss Clarendon," said the valet; and, with another obeisance, he took his departure.

The hampers which he brought with him had been deposited by the hackney-coachman in the passage during the interval occupied by the preceding colloquy, and the sisters now proceeded to examine them. There was a quantity of the finest forced fruit, which could not have been purchased in Covent Garden Market for less than twenty guineas; and there were two brace of pheasants and a couple of hares.

The sisters were much gratified by the delicate attention exhibited by Mr. Harley; and Octavia's heart smote her for having so emphatically denounced his conduct in quitting them with such abruptness on the night when they first formed his acquaintance. She even looked forward with secret pleasure to his promised visit for the evening; but she did not suffer this sentiment to become known to her sister.

At about five o'clock Octavia proposed that they should make such improvements to their toilet as she alleged to be suitable for the reception of a guest who was evidently accustomed to move in the best society; and Pauline, though more indifferent in the matter than her sister, readily assented. They accordingly assumed their best apparel; and they did not forget to adorn themselves with the jewelry which they had received from Mrs. Smith.

Never had either Octavia or Pauline appeared to greater advantage than on the present occasion. The corsage of their gowns being very low, according to the fashion of the time, would have left their white and gracefully sloping shoulders completely uncovered, had not the luxuriant curls showered down upon them, wantoning also over the rich contours that shaped their firm, plump, and well-rounded busts.

The glance of an experienced eye would have, however, shown that Octavia had devoted more care than Pauline to her toilet. The younger sister was satisfied when the mirror told her that she looked as well as ever she did in her best apparel; but Octavia had studied to excel on this special occasion. Never had she bestowed so much pains upon that glorious auburn hair, which in its warm and sunny hues seemed to indicate the ardent nature of her temperament; never had she stood so long before the glass to admire those deep blue eyes which now seemed melting with voluptuous languor; and never had she before thought of observing which smiles imparted the sweetest expression to her moist red lips, or set off her brilliant teeth to the greatest advantage. She felt proud and happy in the consciousness of transcendent loveliness; and as she cast a slow, lingering look over her entire form as it was reflected in the long mirror, her cheeks flushed with exultation and her neck arched superbly, as if in anticipation of some triumph which her charms were destined to achieve.

And now behold the two sisters seated in the front parlour, one on either side of the cheerful fire that blazes in the grate. The curtains are drawn over the window, the lamp diffuses a softly golden lustre throughout the small but comfortable room, and the table is spread with the tea-things, which give an air of such perfect domesticity to the scene that a prince, had he been present, would have gladly accepted the invitation of those beautiful girls to join them in the humble meal.

Pauline was whiling away the time with a romance; Octavia was absorbed in her reflections. These were, however, by no means disagreeable; for, with the sanguine disposition characteristic of her age and her inexperience, she had fallen into a train of thought which gradually led her on to a shadowing forth of her own views of happiness, — that delightful castle-building upon the golden sands of the future.

The expected coming of Mr. Harley had led her to reflect upon his handsome person, the easy elegance of his address, the nobility of his air, his melodious yet manly voice, the irresistible sweetness of his smile, and the fascinating style of his conversation. Then she remembered that he had declared himself to be unmarried, and an involuntary sigh stole upward from her bosom. She felt the blood rushing to her cheeks and her very ears tingling with the blushful glow; and though she started for a moment and was even vexed with herself for having allowed the sigh to follow the reminiscence, yet at the next instant she plunged again into a delicious reverie, wherein her girlish bashfulness gave way to a yielding softness and a dreamy voluptuousness.

Suddenly a loud knock at the front door startled Pauline from her book and Octavia from her meditations; and the latter awoke to what appeared to be a guilty consciousness of having made him who was now about to enter the hero of her thoughts. Again did the blood rush to her cheeks; and the warm glow, not having had time to ebb away ere Mr. Harley was ushered into the room, overspread her lovely countenance once more with a renewed suffusion.

Mr. Harley pressed Pauline's hand with a friendly cordiality; but so enraptured was he by the blushing and voluptuous charms of Octavia, that he carried her hand hastily to his lips and imprinted upon it a fervent kiss. So sudden was this movement that Octavia had not time to resist, even if she had possessed the inclination; and so rapidly was it accomplished that Pauline did not observe it. A tide of happiness appeared to rush in to the elder sister's soul; it seemed to her as if she had unexpectedly and all in a moment experienced the realization of a delicious dream, and indescribable sensations of bliss came over her like a warm glow, as if she had just quaffed a goblet of champagne.

Mr. Harley was a thorough man of the world, and deeply versed in all the mysteries and intricacies of the human heart. But especially was he an able anatomist of the female mind, which he could dissect and comprehend in an instant. The emotions experienced by Octavia were not lost upon him; he perceived and deciphered them almost as soon as they had sprung into existence, and he saw in a moment that he was not indifferent to her. She had not withdrawn her hand, she had uttered no ejaculation when he pressed it to his lips, nor had she resented his conduct. The blush that suffused her cheeks was indicative of deep and burning joy, and not an evidence of indignation; and Mr. Harley knew by the melting voluptuousness which beamed in her eyes, and by the profound heaving of her swelling bosom, and the sympathetic thrill which shot through every vein in her fair hand during the few seconds that he held it in his grasp, — by all these symptoms was he assured that he had only to demand the love of Octavia Clarendon in order to obtain it.

Perceiving the preparations which had been made on the table, Mr. Harley declared that if there were one thing that he longed for more than another in the shape of refreshment at that moment, it was a cup of tea; and this assurance induced Pauline to bustle about all the more actively, while the guest seated himself next to Octavia.

" We have to thank you, Mr. Harley," said this young lady, her bosom palpitating with the subsiding of her emotions, even as the swell remains on the surface of the ocean after the storm has passed, — " we have to thank you for the handsome present you sent us this afternoon — "

" A mere trifle — not worthy of your acceptance," interrupted the visitor; " but it consisted of the only things I could heap together in a hurry, for the purpose of proving that you were not absent from my thoughts — as you, indeed, never can be," he added in a low and hasty whisper aside to Octavia, and with strong emphasis on the pronoun. " But I promised you certain explanations," he continued, almost immediately, perceiving that the elder sister's confusion was such as to be likely to attract the notice of Pauline. " At least I hope that my valet Edwards did not omit to mention the fact that I knew an apology to be necessary for my abrupt, unaccountable, and apparently rude departure the night before last."

" Your domestic obeyed your orders with exactitude, Mr. Harley," said Octavia, now recovering her self-possession; " but we require no explanation — being well aware," she added, timidly, " that you are incapable of acting with intentional rudeness."

" A thousand thanks, Miss Clarendon, — dear Miss Clarendon, — for your kind opinion of me," exclaimed Mr. Harley, fixing upon her a look of indescribable tenderness, which she involuntarily returned, for she was not mistress of her actions, much less of her emotions. " I must, however, in justice to myself, as well as from respect to you, explain the reasons of my precipitate disappearance. But first permit me to ask whether those ladies happened to mention to you who they were — "

" One was a Mrs. Mordaunt, and the other a Mrs. Smith," answered Pauline; " but Octavia and I had our suspicions on that head," she added, archly.

" Indeed! " ejaculated Mr. Harley, darting a keen and searching look upon the younger sister; " and what might those suspicions be, Miss Pauline? "

" Oh, we thought it very probable that they might be great ladies travelling *incognito*," returned the laughing girl, as she desisted for a moment from her occupation of pouring out the tea.

" Not unlikely," observed Mr. Harley, with a peculiar dryness of manner which might have been even taken for covert satire had the sisters been experienced enough thus to comprehend it. Then, instantly resuming his usual bland, affable, and peculiarly gentlemanly tone and deportment, he said, " I presume that Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Mordaunt did not make any allusion to me? "

" None," replied Pauline. " But did you happen to know those ladies, then? I should scarcely think so — or else you would not have run away so ungallantly," added the young maiden, in a playful manner.

" Ah! now you remind me that I have yet to give you a certain explanation," said Mr. Harley, " and I will delay it no longer. The truth is, then, that in those ladies belonging to the broken chariot I recognized near relatives of the ungrateful friend who had placed me in a temporary embarrassment; and so irritated became my feelings at the time that I knew not what I did. Acting without the least forethought, and only in obedience to the impulse of the moment, I hurried away in order to avoid the necessity of even exchanging a word with those whose presence awoke such painful reminiscences."

" Then you were acquainted with the two ladies? " said Octavia; " and you can inform us whether they gave their real names, or whether the romantic notion of my sister Pauline be correct? "

" Yes, dear Miss Clarendon, they did not deceive you in respect to their names," answered Mr. Harley, — " as who indeed would deceive you in anything?" he added, sinking his voice to the lowest whisper and availing himself of the opportunity afforded by Pauline's turning aside for the moment to cut up a cake.

The tea was now served around, and not only did Mr. Harley force himself to swallow two cups of a beverage which he in reality detested, but also managed to eat a slice of cake, though he knew it would disagree with him. But he was well aware of the immense strides he should thus make in the good graces of these artless, frank, and good-natured girls by adapting himself familiarly to their comparatively homely habits; and thus by the time that the old charwoman was summoned to clear the table, he had as it were insinuated himself into a position of as friendly an intimacy as if they had known him for a dozen years.

But then his manners were so fascinating, his conversation so delightful, and his attentions so constant, and yet so delicate. Without an effort and also without affectation, he displayed a perfect acquaintance with the literature of the country, made striking comments upon the passing events of the day, and related several amusing anecdotes relative to those great men of the age whose names were in everybody's mouth. Then, with an easy and apparently quite natural transition, he slided glibly into a critique upon the last new dramas produced at the national theatres, and by a few rapid remarks on the musical talent in vogue at the time, proved his exquisite taste and delicate perception in respect to the divine art.

In this manner the time passed rapidly away, minutes flew by with silent wings, until they accumulated into hours, and when the clock struck ten, Pauline quitted the room in order to give directions for supper.

The moment Octavia found herself alone with Mr. Harley, a species of tremor came over her, not of pain, nor yet altogether of pleasure, but a strange commingling of the two, such as when hope and fear retain the soul in the excitement of suspense.

"Oh, what happiness have I experienced this evening!" exclaimed Harley, turning toward the blushing, trembling maiden, and bending upon her a look full of the most melting fondness. "The few hours that I have passed with you, lovely Octavia, have appeared to me an Elysian felicity, an interval so full of heavenly bliss that it were worth while to give the ten best years of one's existence to enjoy it again! Yes, adorable girl," he continued, his tone becoming more fervent and his manner more impassioned, "I loved you the first moment that I beheld you, and ever since you have not once been absent from my thoughts. I have cherished your image — I shall ever cherish it," he exclaimed, seizing her hand and pressing it to his lips in rapture.

"Mr. Harley — I implore you — oh, I conjure you — nay, I command you — release me," faltered Octavia, a deeper blush suffusing her countenance, while her eyes appeared to swim in a liquid langour and her bosom palpitated with a variety of conflicting emotions, joy and fear preponderating.

"Nay, do not seek to deprive me of this fair hand, Octavia," said Mr. Harley, throwing himself on his knees before her, and gluing his lips to the hand which he still retained in his own, and which the bewildered girl exerted herself but feebly to withdraw. "Do not dash away the cup of happiness and hope which you have raised to my lips. I love you, Octavia,— I adore you, — for you are all that is beautiful, and good, and excellent to be beloved. And, believe me, sweet girl, when I take Heaven to witness that never until now have I known what true love is. Never until I saw you did I experience the exquisite bliss that attends on that passion. Look upon me, Octavia — do not avert your eyes," he continued, with all the winning eloquence of his seductive tongue. "Turn upon me those glances that flash like lightning through my veins, let me contemplate my own soul speaking in your eloquent orbs, suffer me to read the delightful language of hope in the glorious beauty of your looks."

Bewildered and rejoicing, with indefinable feelings of fear mingling with a thrilling exultation, — partly succumbing to an influence which she could not control, and partly yielding to the impulse of her inclinations, — Octavia bent down her head until her long, glossy auburn tresses showered over the shoulders of Harley, as he knelt at her feet, and her polished, warm forehead came in contact with his fine and open, but flushed and heated brow.

Starting from his suppliant posture, he threw his arms around the yielding maiden, pressed her to his bosom, murmured words of impassioned ardour and vows of eternal love, and imprinted innumerable kisses on her glowing features.

At length extricating herself from his embrace, and hurriedly smoothing her dress and arranging her disordered hair, she turned upon him a look of mingled tenderness and reproach; but he strove to seize her fair hand in his own.

" Release me — for God's sake let me go! " she murmured. " My sister will return in a moment — "

" And I will tell her that I love — that I adore you, charming Octavia! " interrupted Harley.

" No — no — not yet! " said Octavia, yielding to him her hand, and holding down her blushing countenance. " Consider, Mr. Harley — "

" Call me by my Christian name, dearest, — call me George," he exclaimed, passing his arm around her waist and drawing her gently toward him, until his cheek rested upon the glossy surface of her radiant hair.

" Consider, then, George," she proceeded in a low, tremulous, yet tender tone, which seemed like the sound of a silver bell oscillating in a strong breeze, — " consider that we have known each other for so short a time — that my father is absent — "

" Well, then, my angel, we will for the present conceal our love," said Harley. " But do you — can you love me? Oh, now upon your reply all my happiness reposes! "

" And were I to answer in the affirmative," said the rejoicing, exulting, but trembling girl, " you would think — "

" Only that you are as kind and tender as you are beautiful."

" What words would you have me speak? Oh, what would you have me say? " murmuringly inquired the agitated girl.

" I would have you tell me that you love me! — yes, love me as I love you! " responded Harley. " Tell me this, sweet maid! — adorable Octavia! — tell me this, and make me happy! — oh, immeasurably happy! "

" But — but," she murmured, " if I did, you would deem me bold — forward — rash — inconsiderate — "

" Oh, no — no! I can never entertain a sentiment injurious to you, my beloved Octavia! " interrupted George Harley. Then, drawing her to a seat, and placing himself by her side, he said, "Tell me, therefore, that you do love me — or at least assure me that I am not indifferent to you. Look up, my angel — turn your heavenly countenance toward me — and now let me behold those delicious lips frame the delightful words, 'I love thee!'"

"Oh, who can resist your winning eloquence!" murmured Octavia, whose beauteous eyes expressed all the tenderness of an engrossing passion. Then, after a few moments' pause, she exclaimed, "Yes, George — I love thee!"

Again did the enraptured Harley imprint a thousand kisses upon her flushed and glowing countenance; again and again did he clasp her to his breast, and he could feel her bosom throbbing against his chest like the undulations of a mighty tide ebbing to and fro. Octavia was lost as it were in a new world of ineffable bliss. She felt like one who has suddenly passed from the monotony of a well-known and long familiar clime into a glorious land where streams are most pearly, foliage most green, flowers most beautiful, fruits most luscious, and the air most fragrant; and, forgetful of the past as well as reckless of the future, she abandoned herself to all the ecstasy, the delirium, and the glow of a new and transcendently blissful existence. It was a full sensation of love that the beauteous maiden thus experienced; and it was a species of poetic sensuousness that surrounded her as with a halo, bathing the cheeks in crimson hue and pouring a flood of light into the swimming eyes.

While thus locked in Harley's fond embrace, Octavia thought not of her sister, nor of the danger of being discovered in that position, nor of anything save the Elysian bliss which she derived from the new sentiments that animated her and the paradise which had thus been opened to her imagination's enjoyment; and had opportunity served — had there been no fear of the sudden return of Pauline — Harley would have found her then and there an easy conquest. But strong though his passions were, yet was he enabled to command a certain amount of presence of mind; and gently separating from the confiding, loving girl, he said, "This is a heavenly dream of happiness in which all worldly thoughts are absorbed. But we must exercise prudence, my angel — and 'tis now for me to remind you that Pauline will soon return. Tell me, sweetest girl, can you possibly find an excuse to go out alone for an hour or two to-morrow evening? Nay — start not — I have so many things to tell you — so much to say to you, my beloved Octavia! "

" Oh, do not ask me to act with such duplicity toward my sister! " murmured the young lady.

" Duplicity, dearest? " said Harley, with a well-feigned air of surprise, yet blended with the softness of a reassuring smile.

" Oh, yes, — duplicity! " repeated Octavia. " Would it not be duplicity — deceit — dissimulation — "

" Heavens! that I should be deemed capable of urging you, my charmer, to such a course! " again interrupted the man of the world, with another look of surprise. " No — never! I love you too well, Octavia! Hear me! "

" I will — I will! Speak! What do you mean? " asked the trembling girl.

" 'Twas you yourself, my charmer, who implored me not to proclaim my love in the presence of Pauline," said Harley. " But if you have no confidence in me, Octavia — if you fancy for a moment that I would counsel you in any way to your own injury or disgrace," he added, his tone suddenly assuming a hauteur mingled with reproach, " then am I unworthy of your affection! "

" Oh, now you are angry with me, George," she faltered, while tears started forth upon her long dark lashes.

" No — no, my adored girl, I cannot be angry with you," exclaimed Harley, kissing away her tears. " Only promise that you will meet me to-morrow evening — "

" I will," murmured Octavia, in a tone that was scarcely audible.

" Thanks, dearest — a thousand thanks," returned Harley; and the joyousness of his tone and manner excited such ineffable pleasure in the bosom of Octavia as to stifle the momentary remorse which had stricken her with a sudden pang when her lips breathed an assent to her lover's prayer. " To-morrow evening, then, my beloved one, we shall meet again," he continued, in his tenderest and most seductive tones. " The place of appointment shall be at the very respectable and fashionable millinery establishment of Mrs. Brace, in Pall Mall. At six o'clock I shall be there, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the most lovely and best-beloved of women. Tell me, then, Octavia — tell me that I shall not experience disappointment."

The too-confiding girl breathed the required promise; and Harley, with difficulty veiling the triumphant feelings which animated him, now besought her to compose herself in such a manner that Pauline might not suspect the tender understanding which existed between them. This was by no means an easy task for Octavia to achieve, so full of ecstatic feelings was her soul. But love is often wonderfully suggestive of what may be termed a venial duplicity; and the young lady accordingly succeeded in concealing the ardour of her passion beneath a studied reserve, so that the evening passed away without affording the slightest ground for exciting a suspicion on Pauline's part.

Mr. Harley partook of the supper which had been prepared; and during the meal his conversation grew more animated, sparkling, and attractive than ever. Octavia was charmed and fascinated, and there were moments when she could have thrown off her reserve, started from her seat, and flung her arms about his neck, claiming him as her lover in the presence of Pauline; but, though it was painful to restrain her feelings beneath the iron control of prudence, she nevertheless succeeded in thus exercising a severe domination over them. On the other hand, Pauline was gay, sprightly, and in excellent spirits; but while she admired Mr. Harley's brilliant qualifications, and even felt proud of possessing such an acquaintance, she shared not in the softer and more tender feelings that had acquired such empire over her more yielding, sensitive, and impassioned sister.

It was nearly midnight when Mr. Harley rose to take his leave; and Octavia accompanied him as far as the garden gate.

" You will not forget your promise for to-morrow evening, my angel? " he whispered, as he hastily but fervently pressed her hand to his lips.

" No," she murmured, in a scarcely audible tone, and they separated, Harley departing to gloat in anticipation over the conquest which he hoped full soon to achieve, and Octavia returning into the villa, to dream of the man who had obtained such empire over her soul.

CHAPTER X

THE KINCHIN-KEN — THE TABLES TURNED

In the time of which we are writing, Grub Street was the uneuphonious and repulsive appellation of that long, narrow, and dirty lane in the Cripplegate district which now bears the name of Milton Street. At the present day the features of that thoroughfare are none of the most inviting; but at the close of the eighteenth century the aspect of the place was disgusting and villainous in the extreme. There was not a vestige of pavement; and the ground was so uneven and rugged that few vehicles ever ventured that way, for in the fine weather they stood a chance of being overturned by the mounds of concrete dirt that dotted the lane, and in the rainy seasons the wheels were sure to sink into deep ruts.

The houses were of the most miserable description, the shops of the poorest kind. Every dwelling harboured numerous distinct families; and poverty forced the poor artisan into a close neighbourhood with the avowed thief. The result, in such cases, too often was that the former, instead of bringing the latter within the sphere of a commendable industry, became infected with the poison of demoralization, and in the desperation produced by failure of work, threw himself into the arms of the villain who promised a rich harvest with little trouble in the reaping. Vice and depravity accordingly spread like a pestilence in that locality; and as the first words which infants were taught to lisp were oaths and imprecation, so the last which they uttered in their manhood were too frequently the death-prayer on the gallows.

And who can wonder if Grub Street and its neighbourhood had become a noted academy for the training of thieves, a seminary whence the ranks of vice, demoralization, and crime recruited themselves from day to day, a hideous school of infamy where the preceptors were the wretched children's own parents? Who can wonder, we again ask, if Newgate, which was so ominously handy, had no fear of finding its felons' wards and its condemned cells deserted, so long as the low lodging-houses, the boozing-kens, the brothels, the receivers' and fences' shops, and all the other dens of iniquity in which Grub Street abounded, flourished in all their fetid and rank luxuriance, — the noxious weeds of the social system.

Reader, take the map of the Great Metropolis, and with " The Mysteries of London " by your side for ready reference, circle with a dark line, either with pen or pencil, each and every loathsome district or neighbourhood which you will find described in the two series of that work or in the one which you are now perusing. Then calculate the proportion which the haunts of crime and the skulking-places of poverty bear to the localities where comfort is found or where opulence and splendour reign. The result will prove that two-thirds of the mighty Babylon are covered with a plague-mist of demoralization, misery, ignorance, wretchedness, squalor, and crime. And yet a thousand towers, pinnacles, and spires point up to heaven, and indicate the houses of God and the temples of worship. Oh, what have the myriad fat and bloated pastors done for the population that swarms in those frightful neighbourhoods? Who can trace in those scenes of depravity the influence of the pulpit, or in those sinks of destitution the beneficence of paternal government? If a missionary of religion be ever encountered in such places, be well assured that he belongs not to the Established Church, which is so extravagantly paid by compulsion, but to the sphere of Dissent, which is sustained by voluntary contributions. And, again, if the votary of education be seen amongst the swarming regions of the poor, rest assured that he is no paid emissary of a national system of instruction, but a philanthropist who seeks to impart knowledge on an eleemosynary principle.

At the time of which we are writing there were numerous public-houses and boozing-kens of the vilest description in Grub Street; but none was more notorious, with an evil renown, than a certain flash crib denominated the " Kinchin-Ken." As its name implied, it was a resort for juveniles of both sexes, — boy-thieves and prostitutes of the most tender age; and no phase of human depravity was exhibited in more appalling hues even at the Beggar's Staff than at the sink of profligacy of which we are speaking.

Let the reader picture to himself a small room, filled with rude tables and ruder forms; then, an inner chamber of smaller dimensions still, and with the door of communication removed so as to afford uninterrupted egress and ingress between the two, the ceilings blackened with smoke, and the walls stained with innumerable spots of grease; and about three dozen boys and girls enjoying themselves in a variety of ways by the light of two or three pitiful candles. The atmosphere of the den was rendered pestiferous with the odour of strong onions, the smell of tobacco, and the fetid exhalations from the filthy garments and persons of the profligate horde.

The ages of the inmates of these rooms averaged from ten to sixteen; and the boys all belonged to an organization having a captain at its head, and bearing the name of the "Kinchin-Prigs." This chief was present on the occasion which we are now especially describing. He was lolling on a form, with a short pipe in his mouth, his right arm around the waist of a dirty drab of a girl who was his avowed mistress, and his left hand grasping a chairman's hammer, which he rapped energetically upon the table whenever he considered the noise to be growing too clamorous. Great deference was paid to the Kinchin-Grand, as this youth of sixteen was denominated; and certainly if the most hang-dog countenance ever seen, uniting in all its lineaments every sign of dissipation with inveterate profligacy, low cunning, and a certain expression of villainous shrewdness, — if such were the qualifications necessary for the chief of this pestiferous society, then did the Kinchin-Grand well deserve the "bad eminence" to which he had risen.

We may as well observe that his paramour was about his own age. Her face was pale and sickly with the vicious courses which she led, though her form was bloated and precociously matured from the same cause; and her features indicated a compound of low cunning and brazen assurance. She was known amongst her associates as "Shickster Sal," the titular portion of the name being acquired from the fact that this wretched young girl had been well and even tenderly brought up until about the age of twelve, when she was enticed away from her home and parents by some vile old woman; and ever since she had clung to the life of dissipation and profligacy which we now find her pursuing.

It wanted about twenty minutes to the midnight hour when Mr. Page, dressed in the shabbiest suit of clothes which the porter at Hodson and Morley's had to lend him, and with his face and hands purposely smeared over with dirt, entered the Kinchin-Ken. But scarcely had he reached the threshold of the door opening into the front room, when the scene that burst upon his sight produced such a poignant sensation of loathing that he stood for a few moments almost motionless with mingled surprise, horror, and disgust. For simultaneously as his eyes were seared by the spectacle of half-naked girls and wretched boys wrapped in rags, all engaged in a hideous orgy, his ears were assailed by the jabber of many tongues, all enunciating language of the most obscene, filthy, and profane description. In fact, the Beggar's Staff was a perfect paradise compared with this pandemonium that now broke upon his view; and the society he had seen at the former place appeared angels of light in contrast with the juvenile specimens of brutalized humanity that were huddled together in the Kinchin-Ken.

" Oh, I say, Bill, here's a feller a-comin' whose face is quite unbeknown," exclaimed one of the thieves, catching sight of Mr. Page. " We'll make him stand a pot or two, or I'm jiggered. Come in, old feller. Don't stand on nothink like ceremony. We'll make room for yer."

Page, recovering his self-possession, instantly accepted the invitation thus blurted forth at the top of a voice which sounded like an asthmatic bagpipe; and immediately three or four little wretches of boys and girls made a place for him at their table, giggling heartily amongst themselves while he was taking his seat, as if it were excellent fun.

" Now, then, old feller, wot'll yer stand? " demanded the youth who had already addressed him. " Our lush is heavy yet, yer see," he continued, turning a pewter pot upside down to prove that it was empty.

" I shall be very glad to stand a few quarts of beer for this good company," said Page, throwing into his manner and voice as much coarseness as he could, and at the same time flinging two or three shillings down upon the table.

"'NOW THEN, OLD FELLOW, WHAT'LL YOU STAND'"

Original etching by Marcel.

"Brayvo!" ejaculated several voices. "Brayvo — bray-ay-vo — oh!" shouted the rest, taking up the chorus; and when order was restored by the rapping of the Kinchin-Grand's hammer upon the table, the landlord of the place made his appearance from some back premises.

"Well, what is it now?" demanded that individual, who was a short, thin, dirty old man, with a very wrinkled and cadaverous countenance and surly looks.

"Here's a feller as is game to stand heavy yet for us all," responded the Kinchin-Grand; "so look alive, Old Bloak, and bring in the lush."

The landlord's features underwent a species of grim relaxation as he received the silver from Page's hand, but before he departed to execute the commission, he sounded each coin on the table; then, quite satisfied with the result of a process which was doubtless very necessary in such an establishment, he used all possible despatch to supply the amount of malt liquor ordered.

The health of the individual who had provided this treat was now proposed by the Kinchin-Grand in a speech stuffed so full of slang terms and flash expressions that had Mr. Page been at a Chinese banquet, with a Mandarin holding forth in his own language at the head of the table, the whole affair would have proved equally intelligible. However, the commercial traveller's health was drunk with uproarious glee; and almost immediately after this ceremony was performed, the Magsman entered the room.

The appearance of that formidable personage was the signal for fresh outbursts of rejoicing. The boys looked upon him as affording the brightest example that could possibly be offered to their contemplation, a sort of thieves' cynosure, combining all the admirable qualities of Dick Turpin, Jack Sheppard, and other individuals noted in the Newgate calendar, — a hero, in fine, the mere mention of whose name was sufficient to excite the fires of emulation in every breast. On the other hand, the girls surveyed him with profound deference and respect; and had King George III entered the place at that moment the young prostitutes would not have thought half so much of the company of that monarch as of the presence of one whose marvellous deeds were calculated, if recorded in print, to invest the annals of crime with the interest of romance.

The Magsman shook hands with the Kinchin-Grand and Shickster Sal, and then bestowed the same mark of condescension upon Page. He likewise dispensed a few shillings in regaling the juvenile horde; and, having apologized for leaving the delectable company in such haste, he took his departure with the commercial traveller.

"Well, what do you think of that scene?" said the Magsman to his companion, when they had gained the street, along which they proceeded in the direction of Cripplegate.

"I could not have believed that such places existed in the heart of a city which boasts its wealth, its civilization, and its philanthropy," answered Page, speaking with an emphasis congenial to his feelings.

"Ah! there are more extraordinary things than that to be seen in London, I can assure you," returned the Magsman; "and may be you'll become acquainted with them some day or another. Lord! what a tale I could tell if I was examined before a Committee of the House of Commons, as they call it! Talk of a man being a Prime Minister who knows nothing — positively nothing — of the misery, poverty, and wretchedness which the working-classes endure; it is ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous, indeed!" repeated Page.

At this moment they had reached the end of the lane which joins Fore Street; and as there was a hackney-coach blocking up the way, Page stepped behind the Magsman to let him proceed first, as only one person could pass by at a time. But just as Page was picking his way between the vehicle and the buildings on his right, the Magsman turned suddenly back, seized him violently around the waist with both arms, and hurled him completely into the hackney-coach, the door of which was wide open at the moment. A man and a woman inside the vehicle caught the commercial traveller as he was thus tossed in upon them; and while a gag was slipped into his mouth by one of these individuals, his eyes were blindfolded by the other.

The Magsman instantly leaped in, after the performance of this feat; and the hackney-coach drove rapidly away.

Page now heard the windows drawn up; and almost at the same time, the Magsman's voice sounded in his ears, saying, "We don't want to suffocate you, old fellow; and so the gag shall be taken out of your mouth. But recollect, that if you venture to speak a word even too loud — much less attempt a cry — you're a dead man. Now then, Lizzy, let his clapper wag again."

The Gallows' Widow removed the gag in obedience to this command; and Page now breathed freely in one sense, though not in another — for an awful consternation was upon him, and death appeared to stare him in the face.

"You see, my ben-cull," resumed the Magsman, after a pause, and speaking in a cool, deliberate tone, "the fact is that you're caught in your own net. The tables are turned upon you, and you must now take the consequences."

"Will you murder me?" asked Page, with a hollow groan.

"Not such a fool as that," responded the Magsman. "Your carcass would not even be worth the price of dog's-meat for the same weight in horse-flesh; whereas you may manage to raise five hundred guineas for your ransom."

"Five hundred guineas!" ejaculated the miserable commercial traveller, now bitterly repenting his folly in entering into this enterprise against the formidable enemies who had not only baffled him but also got him completely in their power.

"Well, ain't it enough?" growled a voice, which Page immediately recognized to be that of the Big Beggarman.

The commercial traveller groaned again, but made no reply; and throwing himself back in the vehicle, he gave way to his melancholy reflections.

The Gallows' Widow, the Magsman, and the landlord of the Beggar's Staff now proceeded to chat familiarly amongst themselves; and the coach rolled rapidly along, the driver frequently whipping his horses to increase their speed.

Upwards of three-quarters of an hour thus passed; and at length the vehicle stopped. Page was immediately compelled to alight; and he was conducted between the Magsman and the Big Beggarman along a place which he took to be a court or alley, — for the mere fact of being blindfolded sharpened his perception relative to the nature of the echoes raised by the trampling of feet and the sounds of voices.

"Hold your tongue, mind," said the Magsman, as they thus proceeded onward, "or it will be the worse for you, depend upon it."

"The butt-end of a horse-pistol is a nasty thing coming across one's brains," added the Beggarman.

The commercial traveller remained silent accordingly; and in a few minutes he was led up two or three steps into a house, the door of which had been previously opened in obedience to the summons of the Gallows' Widow, who had gone on in front for the purpose.

Along a boarded passage Page was now conducted, then down a flight of steep stone steps, at the bottom of which he heard the Gallows' Widow removing the bolts and chain of a door. This process caused a few moments' delay; and the instant the door swung around upon its grating hinges, a voice, apparently coming from the bowels of the earth, exclaimed, " Fiends! will you give me my liberty? "

" Not till the conditions are complied with, my ben-cull," responded the Magsman. " But we've brought you a companion, and you ought at least to thank us for that."

" Miscreants! " ejaculated the voice, in a tone of deep, concentrated rage.

At the same moment, the Big Beggarman pushed the commercial traveller forward into the cellar or dungeon, and the door was immediately closed with violence. Then there was the din caused by replacing the chain, and by shooting the massive bolts into their sockets; and that ominous noise was followed by the sound of retreating footsteps on the stairs.

Page remained standing motionless, breathless, stupefied, until all was silent; then tearing off the bandage from his eyes, but finding himself in total darkness, he sank down upon the damp earth with an ejaculation of indescribable misery.

" Who are you, unhappy man, that have thus been brought hither to share with me the horrors of this den? " asked the voice which he had before heard.

" I am indeed an unhappy man! " cried Page, clutching his hair on each side of his head with his two hands, and tearing it with frantic violence.

" Not more unhappy than I," responded his companion, bitterly. " Oh, my God! when I reflect upon all the misfortunes which have fallen upon my devoted head, I feel as if I were going mad — mad! "

" Then accident has brought together the two most unhappy beings in existence," said the commercial traveller. " But let us know each other better. My name is Page, and

I am, or was, in the service of Hodson and Morley, Wood Street."

" And my name is Sir Richard Stamford," was the rejoinder.

CHAPTER XI

SIR RICHARD STAMFORD

Mr. Page literally bounded from the damp floor of the dungeon as this name fell upon his ears, and with straining eyes he endeavoured to pierce through the intense darkness of the place, in order to obtain a glimpse of the baronet's countenance. But the night that prevailed there was of that profound blackness which, like the Egyptian plague, could be almost felt.

"Sir Richard Stamford!" repeated the commercial traveller, in a tone of such mingled amazement and horror that it startled the unhappy gentleman whose name had produced so unaccountable an effect.

"Yes, I am indeed the individual whom I proclaim myself to be," answered the baronet. "But is it possible that my misfortunes are known to you?"

"Misfortunes!" ejaculated the commercial traveller, with a cold shudder.

"Misfortunes of an unparalleled description," returned Sir Richard Stamford, in a tone of great bitterness. "But although I cannot see your countenance, there is something in your voice and manner which denotes mystery or misapprehension. Tell me, I conjure you, what you have heard concerning me, what the world knows or says regarding the terrible events at Stamford Manor, and what has become of those villains Ramsey and Martin?"

"You do indeed surprise me!" exclaimed Page. "But before we continue the discourse on those topics, permit me to inform you that my present deplorable incarceration here is all more or less owing to you."

"To me!" cried the baronet, his bewilderment increasing.

"Yes, to you!" answered Page, in an impetuous and irritated tone. " If I had not meddled in your affairs I never should have encountered the miscreant who has locked me up in this accursed place. But it was all through meeting you the night before last at the George and Blue Boar in Holborn, and then chasing you in a hackney-coach till you disappeared in the Edgeware Road — "

" Is it possible that these wretches can have given me a madman as a companion? " exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, in a voice too full of anguish to permit the slightest doubt as to his sincerity, or to allow the least suspicion that he was wilfully affecting not to understand the allusions and meanings of the commercial traveller.

" I see that we are playing at cross-purposes somehow or another," said Page; " but with a little patience we may soon get at the truth. In the first place, however, I can assure you that I am no lunatic, — although it is very possible that I shall become one shortly, if my employers don't rescue me from this dreadful dungeon."

" You spoke of meeting me the night before last in a tavern in Holborn," observed Sir Richard Stamford, still hesitating to believe in the alleged sanity of his fellow prisoner, but determined to put him to the test.

" To be sure," cried the commercial traveller. " And I made some civil remark to you; but you turned away as proud as Lucifer, scarcely deigning a reply."

" There is some strange misconception in all this," said the baronet; " for not only was I never in my life at the tavern which you named, but the night you allude to was passed by me in this wretched place."

" And yet you are Sir Richard Stamford? " exclaimed Page, with increasing bewilderment.

" I have already assured you I am that most unhappy and much injured individual," was the mournful response.

" When were you brought here, might I ask? " demanded the commercial traveller. " Let us reckon by dates and days, and then we shall come to the point. The terrible event of Aylesbury took place during the night of Monday, the 4th of January."

" And it was immediately after those fatal occurrences that I was seized, thrust into a covered van, gagged, and brought hither," said the baronet. " As nearly as I can reckon, it must have been at about six o'clock in the morning of the 5th that I was plunged into this cell, where I have remained ever since."

"Nevertheless, it was on Tuesday evening, the 5th, that I saw you at the George and Blue Boar," exclaimed the commercial traveller. "I am sure I cannot be wrong," he continued in a musing tone. "No — it was on the Tuesday evening I chased you as far as the Edgeware Road — on Wednesday evening I went to the Beggar's Staff — and we may call this Thursday night, for the sake of being intelligible, although it is by this time two o'clock on Friday morning."

"Then I can assure you once more that I had been for some hours an inmate of this loathsome place when you imagine that we met in Holborn," said Sir Richard Stamford. "But may I inquire wherefore you chased any individual whom you supposed to be me as far as the Edgeware Road?"

"To speak candidly," replied Page, "I was induced to plunge headlong into that mad freak by the reward offered for your apprehension."

"Villain! how dare you make a jest of my misfortunes?" exclaimed the baronet, starting up in a state of terrible excitement, and feeling his way toward the commercial traveller.

"Keep off, sir!" cried the latter, retreating into a corner of the cellar. "I did not mean to irritate you — I only spoke the truth!"

"The truth!" repeated Sir Richard Stamford. Then, as a sudden idea struck him, he said, in a tone of acute anguish, "I begin to see it all! The miscreants Martin and Ramsey have vilified my name — perhaps accused me of deeds which it is maddening to contemplate! My good friend," continued the baronet, exerting all his strength to subdue the agonizing emotions which raged within him, "pardon me for my warmth, and let us understand each other."

"That is precisely what I most desire," returned Page; "but I am so bewildered and confused that I know not how to separate and classify my ideas."

"Permit me to take upon myself the part of interrogator," said the baronet. "On what ground has a reward been offered for my apprehension?"

"Shall I tell you?" said the commercial traveller, with some degree of hesitation.

"Yes — speak!" ejaculated Sir Richard. "I am now prepared to hear any calumny that may be alleged against me."

"You are accused of terrible crimes," continued Page.

"And those crimes," said the baronet, with forced composure, "what are they?"

"Fraud — forgery — murder — and arson," responded Page, enunciating the words slowly and with much hesitation.

"The miscreants! the calumniators!" ejaculated Sir Richard Stamford; and the commercial traveller could hear that he dashed his hand violently against his brow.

There was then a long interval of profound silence in the dungeon.

At last this pause — so deep, so still — was broken by the baronet himself, whose voice was characterized by that unnatural steadiness, slowness, and yet partial thickness which are the invariable evidence of powerfully concentrated emotions.

"You shall at once be made acquainted with my sad history," he began; "and it will then remain for you to decide the amount of commiseration which woes and wrongs so great as mine deserve. Moreover, it is probable that you will leave this awful place long before the day of my liberation shall come, for I can now form a tolerably accurate idea of the object my persecutors have in view in requiring of me certain conditions which I have hitherto peremptorily refused to fulfil, and to which I am now more determined than ever not to assent. Should you, therefore, regain your freedom, leaving me still a prisoner here, you will not abandon my cause — you will not fail to invoke the aid of justice in my behalf?"

"Assuredly not!" ejaculated the commercial traveller; and he prepared to listen with attention to the baronet's story.

"I am now in my thirty-seventh year," began Sir Richard, "and until within a few days sorrow and I were almost perfect strangers to each other. 'Tis true that my mother died when I was sixteen, and that my father followed her to the tomb at about the period of my majority; but these were afflictions which occurred in the ordinary course of nature, and could scarcely be termed subjects for repining. On the day that I became twenty-one, I found myself in possession of an estate producing seven thousand a year; and, leaving it in the charge of a trustworthy individual, I set out upon a long Continental tour. I had already visited France, during my minority, and my taste for travelling was encouraged by the remembrance of the six or eight agreeable months I had passed at that period in Paris. On this second occasion I resolved to extend my tour through Germany into Italy; and the design was carried into effect. My wanderings were prolonged even beyond my original intention; and five years elapsed ere I again set foot in England. During that interval my property had been much improved through the experience, integrity, and agricultural knowledge of my faithful agent; the tenantry were all prosperous, happy, and contented; and the welcome that greeted me on my arrival at Stamford Manor was of the warmest and most cordial description. All the farmers and peasantry upon the estate were assembled, with their families, to receive me; and I well remember how blithe and joyous was the ball which took place on the lawn in the evening. Pardon me if I have paused to dwell upon an incident apparently so trivial in contrast with the sad events that have recently occurred; but even from the depth of this dungeon a retrospect over those sunny days of my existence is fraught with a consolatory influence."

The baronet ceased for a few minutes, and Page fancied that the sound of a half-stifled sob stole upon his ear through the intense darkness.

"I was now upwards of six and twenty," resumed Sir Richard Stamford, "and it was natural that I should think of marriage. My appetite for travelling was satiated; and I longed to settle down into the enjoyment of a sweet domesticity, in the midst of my tenants. Chance threw me in the way of a widow and her beautiful daughter, who lived in great seclusion at Aylesbury: for their circumstances were extremely limited. It were impossible to conceive a lady more amiable than Mrs. Sedley, or a being more enchantingly lovely than Eleanor. That affection may spring up in the heart at first sight, I am well convinced; because from the first moment that I beheld Eleanor Sedley I loved her. In a short time my passion amounted to a worship — an adoration. It was rather the enthusiasm which is experienced by the youth of eighteen than the sentiment which ordinarily animates a man of twenty-six. And I was beloved in return — yes, beloved as ardently and as well; and the widow was rejoiced at the bright prospects which now developed themselves on behalf of her darling daughter. We were married after a comparatively short courtship; and Mrs. Sedley took up her residence with us at the manor, on our return from the honeymoon-visit to a relative of mine in Devonshire. A few years passed away in happiness so unalloyed, so complete, that had I reflected at all I might have felt assured, judging from the mutability of human affairs, that this Elysian state was too glorious to last for ever. But I had not a care for the present nor a dread for the future, and although our union was unblessed by offspring, this circumstance marred not the felicity which was enjoyed by Eleanor and myself. At length a sorrow came in the form of the sudden and alarming illness of Mrs. Sedley; and in spite of all the skill and attention which medical aid could devote or gold procure, she sank into the tomb. My Eleanor was for a long time inconsolable; but at length her grief gave way to resignation, and then a short tour into Devonshire succeeded in restoring her to her wonted spirits."

Again the baronet paused for a few minutes, at the expiration of which he resumed his narrative in the following words :

" It was on our return to the manor, after this brief absence of a few weeks, that we formed the acquaintance of one whose name I can scarcely mention without a feeling of mingled horror and indignation, so intense that it almost suffocates me. I allude to Philip Ramsey, who had only a short time before become a partner in Mr. Martin's bank. He was then a young man of about four and twenty, with a handsome person, a prepossessing address and highly accomplished; and he speedily became a frequent visitor at the manor. I insensibly experienced a great regard for him; his good temper, unvarying gaiety, affability, and extensive knowledge rendered him a welcome guest. Mr. Martin, who was an elderly man, had been intimate with my parents, and was considered by me as one of my best friends; and thus you will not be surprised to learn that when the two partners mooted certain proposals to me of a financial nature, I listened with much attention and interest. In a word, they represented the amount of benefit which a liberal banking and loan system would confer upon the farmers of the surrounding districts, — by saving that class of the industrious population from the rapacity of money-lenders, and from the necessity of forcing sales of their grain at large sacrifices. I cordially approved of the scheme; and the partners, having succeeded in making this favourable impression upon me, began to throw out hints relative to their want of adequate capital to carry out these philanthropic views. The bait took, and I ingenuously assured them that such an obstacle should not be allowed to stand in their way, as I would cheerfully advance any reasonable sum that they might require. I was rich, and had the means, — too rich and too well contented with the fortune I enjoyed to be influenced by any selfish motives. It was therefore, animated only with the desire to prove useful to a most deserving class, that I suffered myself to be drawn into a partnership with Martin and Ramsey. This connection rendered us more intimate, if possible, than ever; and Ramsey, in particular, scarcely ever suffered an evening to elapse without calling at the manor. Shortly after the settlement of those financial matters, the death of my relative in Devonshire called me into that county; and my wife, being somewhat indisposed at the time, could not accompany me. I was absent for nearly two months; and on my return Eleanor welcomed me with an enthusiasm which at the time filled my heart with joy, but which I now look back upon as the affectation of a vile duplicity. I learned that Mr. Ramsey had been constant in his visits during my absence; and I remember that I thanked him with friendly warmth for the attentions he had thus shown to my beloved Eleanor. Insensate fool that I was! how could I have been so blind? My return was seized upon by my wife as an excuse for giving a grand festival; and I soon began to perceive that a fondness for company and pleasure was gaining a rapid ascendency over her. She grew expensive in her dress, her jewelry, her equipage, and her entertainments; and the once quiet and tranquil manor was in course of time transformed into a scene of incessant gaiety. I never remonstrated with Eleanor as long as her proceedings involved no expenditure that exceeded our income; for I loved her too devotedly, too tenderly, to thwart her in anything that afforded her gratification. Neither did the slightest sentiment of jealousy animate me when I saw that Ramsey was constantly by her side, — ever her partner in the dance, her companion in equestrian excursions, and her right-hand neighbour at the dinner-table. But if I ever reflected at all upon the subject, I saw nothing improper in such assiduity on the part of a young man whom many circumstances placed almost on the footing of a brother to us both. Thus three or four years passed away; and I became so accustomed to the gay, I might even call it dissipated life, which we led, that pleasure grew as necessary to me as if I had plunged into it voluntarily, instead of being drawn into the vortex by the example of a wife whom I adored. In the meantime, Martin was constantly assuring me that the bank was in a highly prosperous condition; and, as I never interfered with him in the management of the business, I had not the slightest suspicion that the affairs were otherwise than as he represented them. Indeed, the luxurious mode of life maintained by himself and Ramsey appeared to confirm the statements thus made to me, as it never struck me they were capable of living beyond the incomes produced by their legitimate share of the profits. But a storm, a fearful storm, was brewing over me, ready to burst with an appalling violence."

Sir Richard Stamford again ceased speaking for a short period; and Page began to imagine that the dreadful charges subsisting against the baronet would be disposed of in such a manner as to shift the burden of guilt entirely from his shoulders to those of others.

"Yes, the dark clouds were gathering rapidly," resumed Sir Richard; "and I beheld them not — suspected them not. Oh, how terrible is the fury of that tempest which explodes so suddenly upon a dead calm, and without even the previous warning of a single drop of rain! Thus was it in my unfortunate case; and I must now summon all my courage, all my composure, all my self-command to aid me in approaching the fearful incidents of Monday last. I rose on that day with a heart as light and free from care as if there were no such thing as adversity in the world; as if no storm ever swept over the unruffled ocean of life. Eleanor was gay, tender, and affectionate as usual, — nay, more so, for she had an object in view. My God — when I think of all that duplicity into whose depths my mental perception can now plunge, as if it were a crystal stream transparent to its pebbly bed! While we were seated at breakfast she turned the conversation upon Lady Wentworth's beautiful pair of gray ponies, which her husband, Sir William, had purchased for her last week; and by degrees did my siren-wife lead me on till I promised that she should be enabled to vie with, if not eclipse, her friend in the graceful attractions of her equipage. Then Eleanor told me how Mr. Ramsey had casually mentioned to her that a similar pair of ponies were to be procured at a certain dealer's in Aylesbury; and after breakfast I set out for town with the view of procuring them at any price. For never had Eleanor seemed more seductively beautiful, never more charmingly captivating than on this occasion. O woman — daughter of Eve! — why art thou ever loveliest when thine heart is most filled with guile? "

And Page knew by the sounds which he heard that the baronet was wringing his hands bitterly — bitterly, as he uttered those last words in a tone of penetrating anguish.

" Unsuspicious, frank, and confiding, I went forth to purchase for my wife the objects of her fantasy," continued the baronet, growing more excited as his narrative approached its catastrophe; " and in this disposition I rode into Aylesbury, followed as usual by my groom. Having put up my horse at the livery-stables, and dispensing with the attendance of the servant for a couple of hours, I called at the bank to procure a new cheque-book, and there I learned that Mr. Martin had departed on the preceding evening for London on pressing business. It struck me at the moment that Ramsey seemed pale and even confused as he gave me this information; but I attributed his appearance and manner to the bustle of business, and took my leave. I thence proceeded to the horse-dealer's, and, after some little bargaining, purchased the ponies, for the price of which I at once wrote a cheque upon the bank. Having thus fulfilled the principal object of my visit to Aylesbury on that occasion, I was returning to the livery-stables where I had left my horse, when I recollected that my gold watch-chain was broken; and as it had been in my possession some years, and was completely out of fashion, I resolved to treat myself to a new one. I accordingly entered the jeweller's shop at which we were accustomed to deal, and made a selection of a new chain. My invariable custom had been to pay ready money to all tradesmen save those with whom it was convenient to have running accounts for the domestic purposes of the manor; and I accordingly wrote a cheque for the amount of the chain. But as I handed it to the jeweller, I saw that he fidgeted and seemed embarrassed, as if wishing to say something to which he was nevertheless afraid to give utterance; and I began to question him. Then, with many apologies for troubling me, many excuses for mentioning so delicate a subject, and many expressions of hope that he should not lose mine or her ladyship's custom, he observed that, having a very large sum to pay in the course of the month, he should feel infinitely obliged if I would settle the account which had been running for the last three years! I was astounded — stupefied. What could the man mean? Whenever Eleanor had fancied any new article of jewelry, I had invariably given her the money to purchase it. How, then, could there be a bill owing? An explanation took place; and, with indescribable feelings of sorrow and amazement, did I learn that Lady Stamford was indebted to the jeweller in the amount of eight hundred pounds! I endeavoured to master my feelings as well as I was able, so as not to suffer the shopkeeper to perceive that my wife had grossly deluded me; and when he opened his books to show me the statement which afforded such terrible evidence of Eleanor's extravagance, I felt sick at heart on discovering further proofs of her duplicity. For, on examining the items, I found that articles which she had represented to me as having cost twenty guineas were in reality a hundred; and so on throughout the entire category. Still, however, veiling the intense anguish which racked me, I gave a cheque for the amount due, and took my departure. As I was proceeding toward the livery-stables, wrapped up in the most painful meditations, I met the horse-dealer of whom I had purchased the ponies. His countenance had in it something so ominous, as he accosted me, that I was struck by his aspect; and no tongue can describe my dismay when he somewhat rudely informed me that my cheque had been dishonoured at the bank. Assuring him that there must be some egregious mistake, and bidding him return home and wait for me, I hurried to the bank, where I questioned the cashier, Mr. Ramsey being out at the time. I then learned enough to convince me that the affairs of the establishment had long been in a most disordered state, and that they had now reached a point when insolvency was inevitable. With a suffocating sensation in the throat and a pressure upon the brain, I went into the private office and commenced an examination of the books. Little accustomed as I was to accounts, yet Heaven knows that it was far from a difficult matter to perceive even through that multitude of figures the utter ruin of the establishment. For two hours did I pore over those books, until my head swam round, my brain reeled, and my senses appeared to be deserting me. I waited for Ramsey — still he came not; and I at length took my departure. It was now five o'clock in the evening, and I felt so thoroughly wretched that I experienced a repugnance to return home. How could I reproach Eleanor for her extravagances, which a comparatively small sum would remedy, when my imprudence in rushing headlong into that fatal partnership had involved us in ruin? I was demented, and feeling that I required to be alone in order to reason with myself, I entered a tavern and ordered dinner merely for the sake of having a private room for an hour or two. There I remained until nine o'clock, and Heaven only can tell what myriads of agonizing, despairing thoughts swept through my brain during that interval!"

There was another pause, at which Page was almost wildly impatient, though he said nothing; but the interest and curiosity now awakened within him were intense even to poignancy.

"Oh, you can well believe that my reflections were of no pleasurable description!" exclaimed the baronet, at length breaking a prolonged interval of silence. "But I could have borne that ruin in which the villainy of my partners involved me — yes, I could have borne that cheerfully — had it not been for the crushing discoveries I had made respecting my wife. And as I meditated upon the duplicity of her conduct, suspicions of another nature began to steal into my mind, — at first gradually, faintly, and imperceptibly, like the breaking of the dawn, then with a gleaming more intense, lighting up as it were all the unfathomable depths of my own soul and bringing forth ideas which seemed to have always had a latent and slumbering though unknown existence there, and then rushing in upon my appalled imagination with a vividness that struck me with dismay. A thousand little circumstances suddenly appeared to spring to life in my memory, all combining to strengthen those horrible suspicions, and rivet the conviction that it was not alone in her expenditure that Eleanor had deceived me. Yes — yes — I saw it all: she was faithless to me — and Ramsey was her paramour! My tongue felt like a flaming coal. Vesuvius seemed glowing in my brain — the maelstrom raging in my heart. I rose from my seat, staggering against the wall for support; and there I sustained myself for a few minutes, literally unable to move. And now you may say it was providential, or that it was mere matter of chance, but it is nevertheless a fact that the little incident of thus leaning against the wall was the cause of my obtaining a deeper insight into the villainy of my partners. For I heard voices in the adjoining room, and, as the partition was thin, I could not help catching what was said. Judge of my feelings when I found that the occupants of the next apartment were Martin and Ramsey! Yes, I knew their voices in a moment; and now I listened in breathless suspense. Martin was speaking at the time; and I heard him explain to Ramsey how the forgeries had been so skilfully executed that he experienced not the slightest difficulty in selling out the stock at the Bank of England! The wretch, then, had been to London on his iniquitous business, and had only just returned. And Ramsey was laughing at the accounts he gave of his success; and they drank to each other's health, for they had been dining together. I was riveted to the spot, my ear was nailed to the wall; and now Ramsey began to tell his partner in fraud how he had been that afternoon to the manor while he knew that I was in Aylesbury, how he had seen Lady Stamford and revealed to her the ruin which had assailed the bank, how he and Martin had taken good care of themselves, and how they had hit upon a certain plan for disposing of me — her husband — to which she had finally consented, though with some hesitation. What this plan was did not appear; but I heard enough to convince me that Martin had made all the arrangements when in London to carry it into execution. The wretches! did they intend to murder me? My blood boiled as if a lava-stream were circulating in my veins; but still I listened. Martin now spoke; and it appeared that he had succeeded in finding out in London a certain Joseph Warren, nicknamed the Magsman, who had cheerfully undertaken for a heavy bribe the business which they had in hand regarding me! Ramsey asked Martin if he were sure that this Warren would be punctual, and the reply was in the affirmative. They then spoke of Warren in connection with some former transaction relative to spurious coin; and Martin reminded Ramsey how well the man had behaved in that instance. I know not how it was that I restrained the indignation and the fury which were boiling within me as all this complication of atrocity was developed; but I suppose it was that I desired to remain and hear the two miscreants to the end. And perhaps I was the more completely riveted to the spot inasmuch as I sought to glean the nature of the dark and mysterious project that they had devised relative to myself. But presently the seducer of my wife — the villain Ramsey — began to speak of her in such light, loose, and ribald terms that I felt maddened as if drops of molten lead were falling upon my brain; and when, no longer able to restrain myself, I was about to rush from the room and burst into the presence of the two men, a dizziness came over me and I sank senseless upon a chair."

Here the baronet paused again; and moanings of unutterable anguish escaped him.

"By heaven!" cried Page, "if I can only get out of this place, I will hunt those two scoundrels into Newgate before I have done with them! But pray proceed, Sir Richard — I am dying to hear the rest."

"And the remainder is terrible!" exclaimed the unfortunate baronet, with the emphasis of a poignant mental agony. "I told you how I sank down in a swoon," he continued, endeavouring to master his emotions. "When I awoke from that senseless state, my watch informed me that nearly half an hour must have elapsed while I remained thus unconscious of all that was passing. I listened again at the partition wall; but the voices had ceased —

all was silent. The villains had evidently retired. How was I to act? I was bewildered, stunned, stupefied. Should I return home, and wreak my vengeance upon my wife? No, I could not harm her, guilty though she were; for her beautiful image floated with supplicating eyes before me! But I felt that to forgive her were impossible. And then those two miscreants — how was I to act toward them? Oh, it was easy to decide that point; I was a magistrate, and could myself issue warrants for their apprehension. This I resolved to do in the morning, for I was too heart-sick, too much exhausted with mental anguish, and too deeply overwhelmed with ineffable woe, to take any deliberate step that night. It was twelve o'clock when I reached the manor; and the servant who opened the door to admit me into the house stated that Mr. Ramsey had been waiting for the last two hours to see me. An unnatural composure took possession of me. I cannot account for it, but such was the fact; and I resolved to hear all that my villainous partner might have to say before I proclaimed how much I knew. I entered the dining-room, where my wife was seated on one side of the supper-table and Ramsey on the other. I threw myself upon a chair with no affected exhaustion, but a real weariness alike of mind and body; and Lady Stamford inquired what had detained me at Aylesbury so long. I observed that there was a subdued anxiety and a tremulousness in her voice, and when I endeavoured to speak, my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth. Ramsey remarked upon the loveliness of the night, which was of frosty clearness and moonlit; and he asked me to walk out with him into the shrubbery, as he wished to converse with me upon matters of great importance. It flashed to my mind all in a moment that he sought to inveigle me into some snare, — perhaps to put into execution the mysterious scheme against me at which he and Martin had so darkly hinted, — and my blood, an instant before so sluggish, began to circulate like thrilling electricity in my veins. Starting from my seat, I poured forth the most bitter invectives alike against Ramsey and Lady Stamford. Did my life depend upon it I could not now recapitulate all that I then said; but I recollect that in a few hasty and cutting words I revealed enough to convince the guilty pair that everything was discovered. With incredible rapidity I must have glanced at the scene at the jeweller's, the dishonoured cheque, the examination of the bank-books, and the conversation which I had overheard at the inn. Ramsey sat stupefied upon his chair; my wife became distracted, throwing herself at my feet, confessing all and everything of which I accused her and imploring my mercy and my pardon. The scene was terrible; my eyes must have flashed fire, my features must have been convulsed with rage. Sensations of deep and burning hatred filled my soul, and my brain was in a ferment. But still my wife knelt before me, with upturned eyes and clasped hands, and her penetrating, agonizing voice, rendered wild with despair, continued to beseech my forgiveness. Oh, even now that voice rings through my head, and the sound will never cease to vibrate there, — no, not when old age shall have made my ears impervious, — if I live so long! Suddenly I spurned her from me, and she fell back; but in the next moment she started up with a wild and piercing cry, and seizing a sharp fruit-knife that lay too ready at hand, plunged it with the energetic violence of despair into her own bosom. Both Ramsey and myself rushed forward at the same instant to arrest the hand which wielded the fatal weapon that flashed across our eyes in the lamplight; but we were too late. The wretched woman's movement was as rapid as if under the influence of a sudden shock of galvanism, and the blow was dealt with the vivid speed of the lightning. Oh, my God! my God! what awful feelings took possession of me when I beheld that beauteous being weltering in her gore at my feet! Forgotten was her guilt, as if guilty she had never been; and I remembered only that she was lovely and beloved!"

The baronet ceased speaking, but burst forth into agonizing lamentations, which sounded dreadful to the ears of the commercial traveller through the deep darkness. At any time and under any circumstances it is a sad and mournful thing for one man to hear another sobbing as if his heart would break; but when those passionate expressions of an ineffable woe acquire a tomblike and hollow intonation from the caverned echoes of a dungeon, and when they burden an atmosphere as black as the blackest night, the effect is solemnly and mysteriously appalling.

Page crept up to the side of his wretched companion, and, taking his hand, endeavoured to console him; but many minutes elapsed ere Sir Richard Stamford could so far recover himself as to bring his strange and terribly romantic narrative to a conclusion.

"Yes," he resumed, in a low, deep, and profoundly mournful tone, "at that moment when I beheld her lying dead before my eyes, I would have given worlds to recall her back to life. And I remember that, suddenly starting from the stupefaction into which the frightful tragedy had plunged me, I felt a panic terror come over me, an appalling dread as if I myself had murdered her! I also recollect that, rushing wildly away from the scene of horror, I threw up the window opening on the lawn, and darted madly forth into the fresh air, that the midnight breeze might cool my burning brain. As if demented, or possessed of an evil spirit that was raging within me, I ran frantically on until I reached the park; and then suddenly stopping and turning round — I know not under what strange influence — I beheld flames gushing forth from the windows of the dining-room. Resuming the wild and unnatural speed that had previously hurried me away from the manor, I flew back toward the burning pile; but scarcely had I emerged from the park and entered the shrubbery, when three or four men sprang upon me from the dark shade of the evergreens, and I was overpowered in an instant. The wretches bore me away to the adjacent road, thrust me into a covered cart that was waiting there, and gagged me to prevent my voice from alarming the domestics and tenants whose forms I had seen moving rapidly about the mansion, in the terrific light of the conflagration. The vehicle rolled rapidly away, pursuing the main road toward London; and having changed the horse twice at lonely wayside public-houses, it entered the metropolis just as the clocks were striking five in the morning. I was then blindfolded, doubtless to prevent me from even forming a conjecture as to the direction which was now taken; but I could judge by a few instructions which the leader of the party gave the driver from time to time, that the van was purposely pursuing a circuitous route. Finally, it was about six o'clock, as I have already informed you, when I was removed from the vehicle and thrust into this cell. Since that moment I have been enabled to calculate the lapse of time by the regularity with which the wretches bring me my sorry meals. But solitude, darkness, the terrific nature of my thoughts, a poignant sense of the tremendous injuries I have sustained at the hands of those whom I never injured, and the incessant contemplation of the wrongs that have been heaped upon me by persons whom I never wronged, — all this would have driven me mad — mad — had not your presence here this night given me a companion to whose ears I could unburden my pent-up, suffocating misery! Oh! the malignant fiends — what do they require of me? That I should sign some paper with the contents of which I am not to be made acquainted, and that I shall consent to expatriate myself for ever to the American Continent, where a handsome pecuniary allowance will be made me. These are the terms on which my freedom can be obtained, these are the conditions which are proposed to me every time my meals are brought. Vainly have I questioned the man who is thus appointed to attend upon me, — vainly have I questioned him, I say, upon many points which so nearly regard me. He is speechless save in respect to a constant reiteration of those terms to which I cannot accede. But now, alas! from your lips I learn that my fame is blackened, that my reputation is assailed by the seducer of my poor wife and his equally vile partner in iniquity. Oh, to escape — to escape from this dungeon, and invoke the justice of the tribunals to decide between them and me!"

"And it will be no difficult matter to prove your innocence," said Page; "for the forgeries at the Bank of England can doubtless be traced to Mr. Martin, the cashier at your late establishment in Aylesbury can give sufficient testimony to clear you of any complicity in the misappropriation of the funds, and the fact of your incarceration here will show how urgent were the reasons that have induced your partners thus to dispose of you. The only points — and they are, after all, the most serious — "

"Speak, my friend — speak candidly," exclaimed the baronet, perceiving that the commercial traveller hesitated.

"I was alluding, Sir Richard, to the — the — death of Lady Stamford and the burning of the manor," continued Page. "But I might as well inform you of a fact which

I read in the newspapers, and which cannot possibly be known to you, — and this is, that the flames were speedily extinguished without having done much injury — "

" And the corpse of her whom I deplore in spite of her deep guilt — was that discovered? " asked the baronet, in a low and tremulous tone.

" The flames had not reached it," replied the commercial traveller; " and it was discovered on the carpet, just as it must have fallen at first, with the fatal weapon still in the bosom. A coroner's inquest was to have been held yesterday, but I of course am ignorant of the result."

" Surgical evidence may perhaps prove the mortal blow to have been inflicted by the hand of suicide and not by that of a murderer," observed Sir Richard.

" Let us hope for the best! " exclaimed Page.

" Amen! " returned the baronet, fervently.

A long silence then ensued in the dungeon.

CHAPTER XII

THE APPOINTMENT

It is necessary to inform the reader who may be unacquainted with London, that St. James's Square is immediately behind Pall Mall West, and that the backs of the houses in the former are contiguous with the backs of those in the latter.

The dwelling of Mrs. Brace, the celebrated milliner, was in Pall Mall; but she likewise tenanted the house immediately behind it, and the front of which accordingly looked into St. James's Square. The one in Pall Mall had the shop, show-rooms, and toilet-chambers usual in a large and fashionable millinery establishment; the other, in the square, had all the appearance of a handsome private residence.

Between these two houses was a means of communication; and as Mrs. Brace's abode was a place of assignation for the voluptuaries and demireps of the West End, nothing could possibly be more convenient for the purpose, — the lady entering by the shop in Pall Mall, and the gentleman by the door in St. James's Square.

Mrs. Brace was now a lady of about forty years of age; and though her charms had expanded into a maturity even more voluptuous than the fulness of embonpoint, she nevertheless might still be pronounced a very fine woman. Her features were masculine, large, and expressive of a sensual disposition; but their outline was handsome, and a splendid set of well-preserved teeth, a fine pair of dark eyes, and black hair which time had left unmarred by a single streak of gray, gave her a certain air of beauty which failed not to find admirers.

She was always dressed with elegance — sometimes with splendour also; but even in the magnificence of her apparel, good taste was invariably recognized. Nothing could be more charming than the coquettish morning cap, with flowing ribbons, in which she appeared at the breakfast-table; nothing more graceful than the wrapper which she wore *en déshabillé* until about eleven in the forenoon. At that hour she would retire to her chamber, whence in the course of ten minutes she emerged in a morning gown of the newest pattern; and her morocco slippers were exchanged for well-fitting shoes — for Mrs. Brace was justly proud of a nicely shaped foot and ankle. But it was about three in the afternoon that this lady might be seen in the perfection of her toilet. If it were summer time, she would appear in a muslin dress of the most exquisite material, or perhaps in a light silk; but whichever it were, be well assured that its make and style were faultless. In winter she would wear either the richest satin or the most glossy velvet; and as her complexion was good — enhanced, perhaps, a little by means of cosmetics — the dark hues of these dresses set her off to the greatest advantage. Instead of bedizening herself with a profusion of jewelry, she displayed but little about her person; nevertheless, the ear-pendants, the chain, and the one ring which she might wear in addition to the wedding-ring, were certain to be chaste, elegant, and costly.

Then her manners were so fascinating, obliging and affable, without sycophancy, polite and respectful, without the slightest taint of cringing servility. All the young ladies in her establishment partook of their meals at a large table where she presided; and the honours were done by her with as winning a courtesy and as strict a propriety as if she were entertaining a number of select guests instead of her own work-girls. And a bevy of beauteous creatures were they, upwards of a dozen in number, and forming a combination of charms as well as displaying a variety of loveliness enchanting to behold. But, alas! every one of these captivating beings had been sacrificed in her turn to some stripling of the aristocracy or hoary voluptuary whose gold was deemed a sufficient price to purchase gems of female chastity.

For upwards of fifteen years had Mrs. Brace been established in Pall Mall: what she was previously to her appearance there, no one knew. She represented herself as a widow, and perhaps was, but she never volunteered any explanation relative to the calling, profession, or business of her late husband. She had set up in business with a large capital, and was not only able to pay her own way without an effort, but likewise to give one, two, or even three years' credit to her aristocratic customers. No one, therefore, took any trouble to fathom her antecedents; and as her establishment was conducted with all the outward appearance of the strictest propriety, its real nature was known only to a very limited circle.

Precisely at six o'clock in the evening, Octavia Clarendon alighted from a hackney-coach at the door of Mrs. Brace's shop in Pall Mall; and on entering, she was immediately accosted by that lady herself, who had no trouble in recognizing the lovely creature whose personal appearance had already been fully described to her.

" Be so kind as to walk this way, miss," said Mrs. Brace, with such a winning smile and such a pleasing manner that Octavia instantly recovered from the embarrassment into which she had been thrown on finding herself in a large shop, splendidly fitted up, and filled with beautiful girls whose brilliant eyes were all simultaneously raised toward her.

Miss Clarendon followed the amiable and handsome lady up a magnificent staircase, into a small but elegantly furnished room; and the moment she crossed the threshold, Mr. Harley, who was already there, came forward to receive her.

The door closed behind Octavia, Mrs. Brace gliding noiselessly out as she drew it after her; and the young maiden was now alone with her lover.

" How can I sufficiently thank you, charming girl, for proving thus mindful of your promise? " exclaimed Harley, leading her to a sofa, and placing himself by her side. " Oh, I was fearful that you would disappoint me! I trembled lest something might occur to retain you at home! "

" Had I obeyed the dictates of prudence, I should not have come," responded Octavia, casting down her eyes and blushing deeply; " but — "

" But inclination prompted you, dearest girl," added Mr. Harley, perceiving that she stopped short with increasing embarrassment. "Yes — tell me the truth — confess that you were not altogether displeased at the idea of seeing me again — "

"Were it otherwise than as you wish me to say I should not be here now," observed Octavia; then, as a sudden thought struck her, she glanced hastily around, and her looks settled with an expression of alarm upon her companion's countenance, as she exclaimed, "But wherefore has that lady who conducted me hither left us?"

"Because she is discreet, my angel," responded Harley, regarding the beauteous maiden with eyes brimful of passion; "because she knows what love is, and how lovers like to be alone; and because she is well aware that we have much, oh, so much, to say to each other! Be not alarmed, dearest Octavia — much less offended. Do you think that I would act otherwise than according to the dictates of that affection which I bear toward you, and which I revealed last evening?"

"No, George — no," murmured the maiden, yielding to the bland influence of his seductive tongue, and the melting harmony of his rich voice. "I have every confidence in you, George — "

"And my life's study shall be your happiness, my well beloved!" exclaimed Harley, throwing his arm around her waist, and drawing her gently toward him.

He was attired in a most elegant and tasteful manner. His shirt-frill and ruffles were of the finest lace; his black pantaloons and silk stockings, fitting tight, and fashioned with the most artistic shapeliness, displayed the admirable though robust symmetry of his limbs; and his waistcoat set with the nicest precision. He appeared handsomer in Octavia's eyes than she had even fancied him to be, much as she had already admired him; and there was something so noble in his air, and at the same time so captivating in his manner, that while she felt as if she were in the presence of a superior, yet she was not overawed.

Nevertheless, she trembled like a dove, and her heart fluttered in her bosom like a bird in its cage, when Harley drew her toward him; but when he pressed his warm lips to hers, and their very looks appeared to mingle in the transfusion of a tenderness which seemed to be the blending of their spirit, indescribable sensations of joy and pleasure and bliss came over her, and she suffered him gently to remove her bonnet and her thick winter shawl.

Then he smoothed down her shining auburn hair, and toyed with her long glossy ringlets that framed her blushing cheeks and swept over her shoulders; and the maiden felt how delicious it was to love and be beloved.

" You told me that you had so much to say to me, George," she murmured, her words appearing to borrow a more liquid intonation from the moistness of the inviting red lips between which they passed.

" Yes, my angel," he replied, his own voice becoming more tender and seductively low, " I wished to make you comprehend how sincerely, how devotedly I love you. But now that we are together, my feelings are so intense that it seems as if no language were capable of explaining them. I am lost, as it were, in the contemplation of the boundlessness of my love, to which I can no more assign a limit than even the wisest philosopher can form an idea of infinite space or eternity. For my love is as vast as space and as enduring as time itself; and I know not how to describe it otherwise. Tell me, dearest, have you ever, when gazing at night up into the vault of heaven, studded with stars, — have you ever fancied that your soul expands with the greatness of that empyrean space which it contemplates? And then, after striving to penetrate in imagination into the mysteries which lie beyond, have you felt your spirit return, as it were, to its clay, wing-weary, humbled, and dissatisfied? If such have ever been your sensations, you can conceive how vain it is for me to seek to measure the illimitable love which I bear you, how useless to calculate its immensity, and how depressed becomes my soul when I cannot find words to shape the ideas which I would fain convey to your comprehension."

Octavia hung with rapture and delight upon every syllable that fell, in such soft and melting harmony, from the lips of her lover; and so lost was she in the dreamlike voluptuousness that enveloped her as with a halo, so completely did she abandon herself to the heavenly vision that seemed to have stolen over her senses, that she observed not the strange light which burned in Harley's eyes, as his devouring regards were fixed upon her. Then he bent his face down so that his cheeks reposed against hers; and then he fastened his lips to hers, inhaling all the fragrance of her breath.

By degrees he became bolder; and Octavia, awakening as it were from her dream of bliss, struggled to extricate herself from his embrace; but he wound his arms around her, he strained her to his breast, he murmured impassioned words and vows and protestations in her ear, and with kisses he stifled the remonstrances and the beseechings that rose to her lips.

But suddenly a strong sense of danger flashed in unto her mind, ay, and therewith a feeling that all this was wrong — very wrong; so that whatsoever virtuous principle was innate in her woman's nature asserted its empire that very instant. The immediate consequence was that, recovering all her presence of mind, and casting off in a moment the voluptuous languor that had come over her, Octavia tore herself from his embrace, exclaiming, "Oh, George! is this your love for me? Would you plunge me into the depths of shame and degradation?"

"Beautiful being!" cried Harley, seizing her hands and pressing them one after the other to his lips, "wherefore do you reproach me? Should not I rather ask you where is that love which you have suffered me to believe that your soul cherishes for me? Oh, give me a love that knows nothing save its own inclinations, that can obey no dictates save those of the heart which contains it, and that absorbs in its own intensity all worldly considerations, all social conventions, and all the cold repugnance of a miserable prudery! Give me such a love as this, my Octavia," exclaimed Harley, his countenance becoming absolutely splendid as he made this impassioned appeal to the maiden's feelings, — "give me such a love as this, my angel, and I will deserve it by a life devoted to you, by an existence surrendered altogether to the delightful duty of ensuring your happiness, and by the homage, the adoration, and the worship of my heart!"

And as he uttered these last words, he dropped her hands and extended his arms toward her.

"Oh, George! what would you have me do?" she murmured, throwing herself upon his breast and raising her countenance to receive the fervid kisses which he imprinted upon her cheeks.

"I would have you become mine — wholly mine," he answered, after a short pause. "I would have you receive me as your husband now — this very evening — that I may be assured of having won you so completely that I need fear no rival. For I am jealous, Octavia — oh! if I have a fault, it is that I am jealous; and until your father has returned and given his assent to our union, ay, even until our hands are joined at the altar, I shall never know an instant's peace. And it is because I love you so devotedly, my Octavia, because I adore you with such a full measure of worship, that I am jealous of you; and if I beseech you to have compassion upon me, and give me every proof of love that woman can give, 'tis only that I may console myself when away from you by the conviction that I have secured a treasure which no rival can take from me!"

"My God! what shall I do?" murmured Octavia, weeping with mingled delight and pain. "Oh, why demand such a proof of my affection, George? Can you not put faith in me? — can you not believe that I love you?"

"Forgive me, dearest, if I reiterate the tale of my jealousy," exclaimed Harley, straining the yielding maiden more closely to his breast; "but 'tis a weakness that I cannot conquer. Have pity upon me, then — have pity upon me. Torture me not with those racking anxieties —"

"Have pity upon me, George!" cried Octavia, gliding from his arms and sinking at his feet, her hair, which had escaped from its confinement, flowing all dishevelled down her back; "have pity upon me, I say — have pity upon me!"

And she extended her clasped hands toward him.

The voluptuary was for an instant chagrined with disappointment, and, supporting himself against the edge of a table, he bent upon her a look the momentary vexation of which changed into an expression of passionate admiration, so beautiful was she, thus kneeling at his feet, with her hair wantoning over her shoulders.

"Octavia, you love me not — you will drive me mad!" he suddenly exclaimed, playing with an infernal artifice upon the tender susceptibilities and yielding sensitiveness of the affectionate girl; and he turned abruptly away, as if about to leave the room.

"SO BEAUTIFUL WAS SHE THUS KNEELING AT HIS FEET"

Photogravure from original by Learned

"O heaven! he says that I love him not!" cried the maiden, wildly, as she sprang to her feet; and in another moment she was again clasped in his arms.

"Ah! then you do love me! — you do love me!" he exclaimed, in a tone half-melting, half-triumphant.

"Oh, yes, I love thee! — God knows that I love thee!" was the fervid response.

Alas! alas! our soul is exceeding sorrowful for thee, Octavia Clarendon, for thou art now in the power of the seducer! Defoliated is the flower of thy chastity; and thou knowest not to whom thou hast surrendered thyself.

But if Mr. Harley possessed a diabolical skill in enacting the part of the betrayer of innocence, he was not the less expert in soothing the soul that was now stricken with remorse and in quieting the anguished alarms that succeeded the moments of pleasure. He who had ere now spoken of the poverty of language when used to convey ideas of a fervent love, found that it was rich in vows, protestations, and oaths calculated to solace the mind of the ruined girl. And how could she do otherwise than suffer herself to be thus consoled? On what other reed could she lean save the promise of her lover? Was it for her to give way to despair, ere hope had ceased to exist? Oh, no; and Octavia, abandoning herself entirely to that confidence which her very position compelled her to place in her seducer, smiled upon him through her tears, and gave herself completely up to him, and shut out from her vision the world which she had, as it were, quitted, in order the more fully to enjoy the delights of that Elysian sphere into which he had wafted her.

It was past ten o'clock when she quitted the milliner's establishment — alone; for Harley made her understand that the "respectability" of the house would be compromised if they were seen issuing forth together. But ere they separated, he had obtained from her a promise that she would meet him there again on the ensuing evening, provided her father did not return home in the interval; in which case he gave her the address of a hotel where he alleged that he was staying in London, and where she might write to him.

Heaven only knows what excuse Octavia made to her sister for her prolonged absence of several hours. Certain, however, it is that the latter suspected nothing; and as they retired to rest immediately after the guilty girl reached her home, the burning blushes that every other minute rose to her cheeks likewise escaped the notice of the innocent Pauline.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DUNGEON

The dungeon in which Sir Richard Stamford and the commercial traveller were confined was in reality a large vaulted cellar. The walls and roof were of massive masonry; the floor consisted of the damp, unpaved ground. A quantity of straw was spread in one corner to form the baronet's couch; and this had not been changed during the few days that he had been an inmate of the place.

Upon that sorry bed the prisoners snatched two or three hours' repose, after Sir Richard had told his lamentable tale. They slept through sheer exhaustion, — a sleep that was rather the prostration of all the physical and mental powers, than the slumber which has a refreshing influence with it and imparts new vigour alike to body and mind when the eyes open again.

Yes, they slept the heavy and leaden sleep which misery often knows; and when they awoke again, it was not to the cheering beams of the morning sun nor to the whispering of the breeze rustling through the defoliated boughs of winter, but to the intense darkness of their cell, and to the din of the falling chain and receding bolts outside the door.

And that massive door swung around upon its hinges, and then the faintest, faintest gleaming of light, shed from the staircase, penetrated glimmeringly into the dungeon, so partially and sickly, however, that it enabled not the prisoners to catch a glimpse of each other's countenance, but merely showed them the form of a man at the entrance.

"Well, how d'ye like your companion, Sir Richard?" inquired the fellow, in a gruff voice, and with a free and easy tone; but it was not the Magsman, as Page had fancied at the first moment when his eyes caught the dark outlines of the somewhat stout and burly figure.

"If I were to tell you that his society was agreeable to me," answered the baronet, bitterly, "you would remove him to another place; and if I were to declare that I prefer solitude you would leave him here in order to torment me."

"Maybe I should," observed the man, with a coarse and brutal chuckle. "But perhaps you'd like to know why we put him along with you at all? Well, I don't mind telling you, Sir Richard," continued the ruffian, after a brief pause, during which he found that his half-interrogative observation remained without reply. "The fact is that we wanted you to learn the real position in which you stand regarding affairs out-of-doors in general, and at Aylesbury in particular. It was very certain that if I had told you all that, you would not have believed me; you would have fancied that I was only making things look as black as the devil, on purpose to get you to accept the conditions proposed. But as Mr. Page is doubtless well acquainted with all that has occurred, and all that people now say of you, why, the chances are that he has not left you in the dark in that respect. Is it not so?"

"My companion has indeed given me a further insight into the villainies of those who employ you to persecute me," said the baronet, in a mournful tone. Then, with sudden excitement, he cried, "But can nothing move you to release me from this dreadful place? My enemies pay you well, no doubt, to keep me here, but I will pay you better if you will let me go. I am not altogether friendless. I can give you a letter to a gentleman who will pay you a thousand pounds as the price of my freedom — "

"Come now, none of that nonsense with me!" interrupted the man, savagely. "I am not to be bribed. The only way in which you can obtain your liberty is to sign the paper."

"Then I will not sign it!" ejaculated the baronet, with feverish energy.

"Just as you please, sir," remarked the fellow. "You will sing a different song before many days are over. Now, Mr. Page — are you awake yet?"

"A straw bed is not very provocative of slumber," responded the commercial traveller, mournfully. "But what do you require of me?"

"If you want to write a note to Hodson and Morley to ask them to ransom you, it may as well be done at once as to-morrow or next day. Five hundred guineas, you know — that is the price," exclaimed the man, with a renewal of his coarse and brutal chuckle.

"Five hundred pounds! they'll never pay it," said Page, in a voice of despair.

"You can but try them," returned the man. "Or perhaps you have some other friend — "

"Not one who will advance such a sum. However," continued the commercial traveller, "I cannot linger here all my life — that is very certain; and therefore I must make an effort. Hodson has got me into this scrape, and he ought to help me out of it."

"Ah! then old Hodson was at the bottom of the plant?" exclaimed the fellow.

"Well, since I have admitted it, there's no use attempting to deny it," returned Page. "But give me pen, ink, and paper, and a light, and I will soon pen a note to Hodson. It can do no harm, at all events."

"You can't write here — there's no table," said the man. "Come along with me for a few minutes. I'll bring you safe back again to the baronet, depend upon it."

Page accordingly issued from the dungeon, the door of which was immediately closed and bolted again; and the ruffian led the way up the stone stairs, into a back room plainly furnished. The commercial traveller threw a searching glance through the dingy window-panes of a small casement; but his looks encountered naught save the dirty walls of the buildings in the rear of the house, and he gleaned not the slightest fact indicative of the part of London where that house was situate. Not a familiar church-tower nor a well-known steeple, that might have served as an index of the locality, met his eyes: nothing save those dingy walls, with their miserable windows, whence hung a few rags to dry.

"You've no more notion where you are, old fellow, than if you'd been dropped out of the clouds," observed the man, who understood what was passing in the mind of Page; and the remark instantly attracted the looks of the commercial traveller toward the speaker, who was a great, stout, strong-built, ill-visaged ruffian, of middle age, and with an enormous wen upon the crown of his bald head.

" I must confess that I am entirely at fault," said Page, in answer to the man's observation.

" And I don't mean to enlighten you," was the gruff rejoinder. " Now, then, there's writing materials, and you'll please to put down on paper just what I'm going to tell you."

Page seated himself at the table, and intimated his readiness to begin; whereupon the ruffian, after some consideration at the beginning, and a long pause between the sentences, dictated the ensuing letter:

" Dear Sir: — I have unfortunately fallen into a trap, and am in the custody of those whom I meant to ensnare. The tables were completely turned against me; and I am in a horrible dungeon, situated I have not the slightest idea where. The men who have thus made me their prisoner mean to hold me fast until five hundred pounds are paid for my ransom. I write this to the dictation of one of them. What I therefore beg of you to do, is to enclose that sum, which must all be in gold, in a bag, label it with a paper bearing the initials J. H. P., and leave it at the bar of the Beggar's Staff, Horslydown. Within six hours after this is done, I shall have the honour of waiting upon you in Wood Street, to thank you in person for your kindness. Do not flatter yourself that Grumley or any one else will be able to find out where I am, and extricate me. Nothing but your compliance with the above request will accomplish that object.

" Yours very obediently,

" J. H. Page.

" Mr. Hodson, Wood Street."

" That will do! " exclaimed the man, reading over the shoulder of the commercial traveller the letter which he himself had dictated, — a process that he considered necessary in order to acquire the certainty that nothing more nor less than he had suggested was contained in the document. " I think that will induce the old merchant to come down handsomely; and, as there's honour amongst thieves," he added, with his disagreeable chuckle, " you sha'n't be kept in durance a minute longer than the time necessary to receive from the Beggar's Staff a message stating that the coin has been left there."

" I hope that the letter will prove effective," said Page, heaving a profound sigh as he rose from his seat.

At the same instant his eyes encountered a long, thick, and well-rusted file that lay upon a chest of drawers within reach of his hand; and it flashed to his mind that many a desperate escape from even a stronger prisonage than the cellar down-stairs had been accomplished by means of a far more inefficient implement than that old tool.

" You don't seem to be a bad sort of fellow in your way," observed the man; " and I think that a drop of something short would perhaps do you good."

Thus speaking, he turned toward a cupboard in a corner of the room; and at the same moment Page secured the file about his person.

The man produced a gin bottle, and each partook of a dram. The commercial traveller was then directed to carry a couple of tin pots full of coffee down to the cellar, the gaoler following him with two large slices of bread; and in a few moments the two prisoners were once more together in the dungeon, the door being again secured by bolts and chains.

For some time the baronet and Page continued to make their meal in profound silence; but when the latter had drained the last drop of his coffee and eaten the last mouthful of crust, he said, in a low, whispering tone, " Do you think it would be impossible to escape from this place? "

" Escape! " ejaculated Sir Richard, his veins tingling with the sensation produced by the bare idea.

" Hush! the very walls have ears! " returned the commercial traveller, seizing his companion violently by the arm, for they were seated close to each other upon the straw. " Listen — and do not interrupt me. I have written the letter to old Hodson, my employer, but I do not for a moment imagine that he will pay the money. At all events, he will take some time to consider the matter well, for he is one of those persons who never do anything in a hurry; and in the interval I shall catch an incurable rheumatism, or die of grief in this infernal hole. It is therefore my intention to make a desperate effort to escape."

"But how?" demanded the baronet, encouraged by his companion's words, although he saw not as yet the least probability of carrying the project into execution. "The door is as solid as the masonry, the walls are hard as rock, and we have not even a nail nor the smallest piece of iron to work with."

"On the contrary, I have an excellent file which I secreted about my person just now," returned Page. "Here — take the implement in your hands and feel it."

"But the bolts and chain are outside the door, and, even if you attempt to file the iron hinges, the noise will be heard up-stairs," objected the baronet.

"We will have nothing to do with the door at all," said Page. "While I was outside the dungeon just now, I had my eyes about me, I can assure you. In the first place, I saw enough of the locality to convince me that this cellar is precisely the width of the house, which is a narrow one; and consequently, if there is any cellar adjoining, it must belong to another house. Granting, then, that there is a cellar on the other side of this wall against which we are leaning, we must manage to get into it — and perhaps the occupants of the next house will not prove hostile to us. At all events the risk is worth running; and this file will serve in a few hours to pick a hole through the wall large enough to allow us to pass into the adjoining place."

"Let us make the attempt, my good friend!" exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, joyfully. "We will work by turns with unrelaxing energy, and I will commence."

"No, let me begin," said the bustling commercial traveller, who felt almost happy in spite of his imprisoned condition. "By the way, the man never comes in with a light — does he?"

"Never," answered the baronet.

"That is just what I had calculated upon," said Page; and at the same moment he began to insert the pointed end of the solid file into the hard mortar of the cellar wall.

The commercial traveller was not strong; but he possessed that admixture of energy, expertness, and skill which sometimes serves a man better than mere physical power. His perseverance, when he was carried away by the excitement of any specific pursuit, was indomitable; and this spirit on his part now received a marvellous impulse from the anxiety which he felt to escape from that horrible dungeon and the small amount of reliance he placed in the willingness of Messrs. Hodson and Morley to assist him out of his dilemma. The consequence was that he worked away with a good will and a heartiness which astonished even himself; and although at the expiration of an hour he had not even succeeded in loosening a single stone, still the mortar was removed all around one to the depth of an inch, and a beginning was thus effected in good earnest.

Sir Richard Stamford now took his turn; and, being a man of great physical strength, he soon made an impression upon the solid masonry. But every now and then it was necessary to stop for two or three minutes, in order to obtain the assurance that no one was listening outside the door; for the baronet, during his confinement in the dungeon, had frequently heard several male and female voices in the house, and therefore knew that there were many residents therein.

By about two o'clock in the afternoon the first stone was removed from its setting, and Page had the honour of this important achievement in the initiative of the task. But the labour was discontinued for a short space; inasmuch as according to such calculation of the lapse of time as the baronet was enabled to make, the presence of the gaoler might be shortly expected with the dinners. This event soon took place; and the prisoners were served with some coarse boiled meat, potatoes, and wretched table-beer. Half an hour was allowed them for the discussion of this meal, at the expiration of which interval the ruffian returned to the door of the cellar to take away the plates, drinking-mugs, and knives and forks.

As soon as the sounds of his retreating footsteps had died away, the work was recommenced with the file; and, as the first stone had been removed, the task grew comparatively easy. At length, toward seven in the evening, — according to Sir Richard's reckoning, — an indentation had been effected to a sufficient depth to enable the prisoners to ascertain, by gently sounding the wall, that there was a hollow space on the other side. They therefore concluded that there was a cellar in that direction; and this belief gave them renewed energy and spirits to recommence their labours after the evening meal of coffee and bread had been served to them.

For four hours longer did they continue to work by turns, though not without grazing the skin off their hands against the asperities of the orifice which they were forming, and receiving frequent bruises on the knuckles by the slipping of the file; for it was by no means an easy task thus to toil on in the unrelieved darkness of that place.

At length the perforation was complete; and Page, thrusting his arm through the aperture, placed beyond all further doubt the fact that there was a cellar on the other side of the wall. The removal of the last few stones, the displacement of which was necessary to render the hole large enough for the passage of a human form, was now speedily effected; and ere midnight the old rusty file and the hands which wielded it by turns had done their duty.

Up to this moment the baronet had scarcely been able to bring himself to believe that escape from the dungeon was really within the range of probability. He had laboured on in that same spirit of desperation which prompts the drowning man to clutch at a straw; and now that he heard himself called upon by his companion to follow through the aperture, he was as much bewildered with mingled hope and fear as that same perishing wretch might be supposed to feel when awakening on the bank to which some succouring hand had drawn him.

Unhesitatingly did Page introduce himself, legs foremost, into the large opening made in the wall; but before the baronet attempted the passage, the commercial traveller ascertained, to the ineffable joy of both, that the door of the cellar into which he had thus entered was not locked. Inspired by this assurance, Sir Richard Stamford followed his leader; and now they paused for a few minutes to gain breath and deliberate upon the course to be adopted.

The decision to which they came was indeed the only alternative that the circumstances offered; namely, to steal up into the house as gently as possible, and risk all the rest. It might be that they would succeed in escaping stealthily forth into the street; it might also happen that they would be overheard by the inmates, and in this latter case they must prepare to resort to means of either persuasion or violence, according to the nature of the individuals with whom they were thus to be brought in contact.

Page opened the cellar door as noiselessly as possible, and all was darkness and silence. He advanced a few steps, groping about with his extended arms. In a few moments his hands encountered the banisters of a staircase; and up those steps he slowly and cautiously ascended, Sir Richard Stamford following close behind.

Still all was darkness and silence in the house.

They gained the ground floor in this manner; and on entering the passage at the head of the kitchen stairs up which they had just come, a faint glimmering of light, shed by some lamp outside or from some opposite window, peeped through the dingy fan-light over the low and narrow street-door at the farther end.

This sickly and ineffectual gleaming was just sufficient to show the two fugitives where that door was situated, but did not enable them to catch the slightest glimpse of each other's countenance.

And still all was darkness and silence in the house.

Slowly, noiselessly, and with painful caution, as if they were afraid of making even a board creak beneath their feet, they crept along the passage, taking five minutes to thread a little corridor of about as many yards in length.

Page was in advance, and consequently gained the street-door first.

He passed his hand hastily up and down, and felt that it was bolted; the key was, however, in the lock.

To draw back the bolts without noise was not a very easy task, for they creaked alarmingly even when moved a hair's-breadth; and so gradually was this portion of the momentous night's work performed, that upwards of ten minutes were wasted thereat. But at length the bolts were drawn back and the door was unlocked.

It now struck Page that if he and his companion were both to sally forth together, they would be more likely to attract the notice of any of their enemies who might be lurking about than if they departed separately. But the commercial traveller dared not even trust his voice to whisper this proposal to the baronet, for he knew how even the faintest utterance of the human tongue is apt to sound amidst the deep silence in which a house is plunged at the dead of night; and he feared that if an alarm were raised in that dwelling, it would spread throughout the neighbourhood, so that their recapture would certainly ensue. On the other hand, he conjectured that if he were to open the door and issue forth himself, the baronet, in his anxiety to escape, would not have the prudence or forethought to remain a little while behind; and, in this perplexity, Page resolved upon a course which was in reality motived only by a precautionary sense, whereas it subsequently appeared in Sir Richard Stamford's estimation to be a deed of magnanimous generosity.

In a word, then, the commercial traveller opened the door as noiselessly as he could, and, seizing the baronet's arm, pushed him gently forth. Sir Richard was only too glad to obey the impulse, and the moment he had crossed the threshold into the open air, the door was closed behind him.

It was at this instant that a groan, apparently coming from an upper story, but sounding with a sepulchral hollowness, as if it were in an empty house, fell upon the startled ears of the commercial traveller. Still he listened, instead of rushing precipitately from the place, for the moan he had heard was rather an indication of great agony, either mental or physical, than of alarm arising from any disturbance in the house.

The groaning was repeated and continued; and the commercial traveller, ever prying and inquisitive, began to experience an inclination to satisfy his curiosity in respect to these doleful sounds. Creeping to the bottom of the stairs, he again listened with breathless attention; and now the moaning, which every instant became more intense, was mingled with ejaculations of pain and broken sentences conveying some idea of the forlorn position of the wretch who uttered them.

"Oh, this is dreadful — dreadful! To be deserted — left to die alone — alone — alone — all alone — in this desolate place! Will no one come? — a single drop of water — only a single drop — my God! my God!"

The commercial traveller had gathered sufficient to convince him that he incurred not the slightest risk by ascending to the succour of the unhappy man whose lamentations thus reached his ears; and he accordingly groped his way up a narrow staircase, until a faint light, glimmering through the chinks in the door of a back room on the second story, induced him to pause there and listen again.

The moans came from within; and Page unhesitatingly entered the chamber.

Heavens! what a spectacle met his eyes!

In a wretched bed, the blankets of which were of the most filthy description, lay an old man whose face was as pale as that of a corpse, and whose dim and glassy eyes, so haggard and sunken, were surrounded with that deep bluish tint which denotes the influence of a wasting disease and heralds the approach of death. His cheeks were hollow and thin; and a beard of several days' growth enhanced the hideousness of his appearance. One emaciated arm supported the aching head; the other lay outside the coverlid, which the hand was clutching as if in the frenzy of despair.

The chamber was not without furniture; but everything denoted neglect, and was characterized rather by a loathsome squalor than a downright penury. For there was food in a cupboard, the door of which stood open, and there was a bottle of spirits upon a shelf, and three or four shillings, together with some halfpence, lay upon the mantel. But everywhere dust and dirt had accumulated, — on the floor, where a scanty carpet lay all kicked up, on the blackened and grease-stained walls, on the dingy window-blind, on the chest of drawers, the table, the two or three chairs, and the bed itself.

Such was the scene revealed to the eyes of the commercial traveller by means of a candle dimly burning and with a wick so long that it appeared as if it had not been snuffed for hours. A gleam of joy shot athwart the wan and ghastly countenance of the invalid as a human being thus burst upon his frightful loneliness; and Page's immediate impulse was to pour water into a cup and hold it to the parched lips of the sufferer. But the man could not raise himself even a single inch to partake of the beverage, ardently longed for though it were; and the commercial traveller was forced to lift and sustain him while he poured the water down his throat.

The cup was emptied, and as the invalid fell back on the sorry, sordid couch, his hollow eyes were raised with an expression of indescribable gratitude toward Page's countenance.

"What more can I do for you, my good man?" asked the commercial traveller, in a mild and encouraging tone. "You seem to be very, very ill — and alone —"

"Yes — yes — all alone — alone!" murmured the invalid, knitting his brows in a manner indicative of mingled rage and despair. "The ungrateful girl — Julia — to desert her own father — leave me for hours — yes, hours —"

"Then you are hungry? — you require food, and you are unable to rise from your bed to take it?" enclaimed Page. "Ah! I understand, poor man, but I will get you food."

"Stay, sir — stay!" said the invalid, as the commercial traveller was turning toward the cupboard to fetch a morsel of bread to place between the famished being's lips. "Stay, sir," he repeated, his voice acquiring strength, now that his throat was no longer parched with a torturing thirst; "I do not require food — I could not eat — I — I am dying!"

"I will run and fetch hither a doctor!" exclaimed the bustling and agile Page, now springing toward the door.

"No — no — stay, I implore you!" said the invalid, in an appealing tone. "I am past all hope — beyond the influence of human aid — I feel that I am dying! And when I am gone — but I must not waste words — my voice is failing me — a dimness is coming over my eyes — where are you, sir? — why have you put out the light?"

And the workings of the invalid's ghastly countenance were horrible — horrible to behold.

"I am here, my good man, and I have not extinguished the light," returned Page, bending over the bed. "But speak — tell me what you have to say — give me your injunctions —"

"Stoop down — place your ear close to my lips," resumed the dying man, now speaking with extreme difficulty. "Are you close?"

"Yes — yes — proceed!" exclaimed the commercial traveller, breathless with suspense.

"Place your hand beneath my pillow — just under my head," gasped the old man. "There — take that pocket-book — tell Julia — Oh! I am dying! My God! my God! pardon — mercy — Hannah — Julia — Julia — Oh! mercy — pardon — pardon —"

And with a deep groan he expired.

At the same instant, as if with an ominous emblematic significancy, the candle sank down in its socket and was extinguished.

A panic terror seized upon the commercial traveller; for the scene of death which he had just witnessed, and to the contemplation whereof he had been so suddenly and unexpectedly impelled by circumstances, was horrible and shocking. There was likewise something appalling in the simultaneousness with which the living man had changed into a breathless corpse and the chamber was plunged into total darkness; and the state of excitement in which Page had been kept for many, many hours now underwent a rapid and fearful reaction.

Grasping, however, the pocketbook which he had taken from beneath the old man's pillow, he hastened precipitately down the stairs, his almost frantic speed accelerated by the horrible thought that somebody or something was pursuing him, and that the cold hand of a corpse would suddenly be laid upon his shoulder or would clutch the skirts of his coat.

On reaching the front door, he began to breathe a little more freely; and while he paused for an instant to secure the pocketbook about his person, a sense of all the danger with which his egress from the house would be attended rushed back to his mind. The death-scene had temporarily driven from his recollection the previous incidents of the night; but now he remembered that he had escaped from a horrible dungeon, and that should he encounter any of the Magsman's party while issuing forth into the street, his recapture and renewed imprisonment were inevitable.

Nevertheless, he could not remain longer in this house of death, for the echoes of his own footsteps appeared to be the sounds of the corpse descending the stairs in pursuit of him!

Opening the door, therefore, with the courage of utter desperation, Mr. Page stepped across the threshold, and a rapid glance up and down the narrow court in which he now found himself afforded the encouraging assurance that his movements were unobserved.

That hurried, anxious glance was sufficient to show the commercial traveller that the houses enclosing this vile alley into which he had emerged were poor and wretched in outward appearance, and that the locality was evidently a low and disreputable neighbourhood. For an instant his eyes lingered on the two houses of which he had seen the interior: namely, the one whence he had just emerged, and that where he had been incarcerated. Lights gleamed from the upper windows of the latter; and Page thought within himself, "The miscreants in those chambers little suspect that their accursed subterranean cell is now empty!"

Away he sped from the court, the name of which he vainly endeavoured to decipher beneath the entrance archway where it was painted; and thence he emerged into a long, narrow, and unpaved street, the aspect of whose houses confirmed him in his opinion that he was in some low neighbourhood. On he went at random, in the hope of finding a hackney-coach stand, and not choosing to ask where he was of the few stragglers whom he met, for fear of exciting some suspicion which might lead him into fresh embarrassments, — on he went, we say, penetrating through a maze of streets and alleys and little thoroughfares, none of the names whereof could he possibly ascertain in the darkness of the night.

Suddenly the clock of some neighbouring church proclaimed the hour of two in the morning; and in a few minutes Page found himself in the immediate vicinity of a dock, which he knew to be in the district of Wapping. It was, then, in the eastern quarters of London that the den existed where he had been imprisoned; but were he asked to retrace his steps from the point he had now gained to the place whence he had escaped, the endeavour would have proved utterly abortive.

His course was, however, at present clear enough; and in about three-quarters of an hour he emerged upon Tower Hill. There he was fortunate enough to discover a hackney-coach, which set him down at the George and Blue Boar just as the thousand clocks of the metropolis were striking three.

CHAPTER XIV

LORD FLORIMEL

We must now return to the establishment of Mrs. Brace in Pall Mall; for while the scene already related was taking place in one room between Mr. Harley and Octavia Clarendon, an incident of some importance was occurring in another.

It was nine o'clock on that memorable evening; the young ladies in the employment of Mrs. Brace were busily occupied in consigning the caps, bonnets, and dresses to bandboxes and drawers, preparatory to the closing of the shop for the night, and the worthy mistress of the establishment was superintending these proceedings, when a servant entered from the interior of the dwelling-house and gave her some whispered information.

"Ah! Lord Florimel!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace, in an undertone; and she forthwith hastened to her own private sitting-room at the back of the premises.

It was a small but elegantly furnished apartment, all its arrangements being quite consistent with that good taste which we have already noticed as pervading the toilet of the lady herself. Vases filled with artificial flowers, a few good pictures in handsome but not gaudy frames, a French timepiece in ormolu, several little ivory statues, six or eight inches high, and exquisitely carved, and a bookcase containing the standard works, — these constituted the principal ornaments of the room. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate, and the wax candles shed their lustre upon the rich crimson draperies attached to the windows.

Lounging negligently in an armchair, tapping his boot with the end of his slim gold-headed cane, and with his eyes fixed listlessly upon the timepiece, was a young nobleman whom we must particularly introduce to our readers.

Lord Florimel — for that was his name — had only a few months previously succeeded to the family title and estates in consequence of the sudden death of an elder brother; and although he was still dressed in mourning, his attire was of the most elegant description. But he needed no adventitious aid to enhance the natural beauty of his person. For beautiful he indeed was, — not handsome, but with that cast of countenance for which Grecian women are so justly celebrated. He was scarcely two and twenty years of age; and a razor had never touched his cheeks, which had all the damask and peachlike loveliness peculiar to the softer sex. His complexion was singularly fair, clear, and stainless; his nose was small and perfectly straight, his lips were red and full, and his teeth brilliantly white and faultlessly even. His neck was long and gracefully turned, his ears remarkably small and delicate. He wore his rich chestnut hair flowing in a wavy mass over his shoulders; and as it was parted with great precision above the high and open forehead, its arrangement completed the feminine appearance of the youthful noble's countenance. His eyes were large, dark, and beaming with sensual passions, the lascivious fires of which were, however, subdued somewhat by the long and slightly curling fringes of the deepest jet, which served as a veil to temper the ardent expression of those splendid orbs.

In stature Lord Florimel was very short for a man, though he was above the middle height of woman. His form was slight, but his symmetry was complete; and nothing could exceed the delicate whiteness of his hands and the diminutive modelling of his feet. His voice corresponded with this feminine style of beauty: it was clear and melodious as a flute, sounding deliciously as that of a lovely woman to the ear. His conversation was, moreover, particularly choice and select; though a voluptuary, he was not a rake, and he never indulged in profane jests, oaths, and imprecations. He was addicted to the pleasures of love, but he abjured those of wine; and, disliking the society of men, he passed nearly all his time amongst females. Fickle, inconstant, and easily excited by a new and pretty face, he had all the caprices of a wanton woman. But his character did not lack generous sentiments nor elevated feelings; he could be charitable in the extreme, when the humour seized upon him, and though he never lent money to a fashionable and dissipated friend, he would drop a guinea into the hand of the poor mendicant who appeared to be a worthy object for relief.

He was unmarried, and likely to remain so; for the idea of linking himself to one woman was, in his estimation, something too dreadful to contemplate. Possessed of immense wealth, and with no parents nor elderly relatives to advise him, he devoted all his time and all his thoughts to the pleasures of love; and, extravagant in nothing else, he lavished large sums upon these objects of his desires. Mrs. Brace — the accommodating Mrs. Brace — was a very useful person to such a character as Lord Florimel; and of the dozen young ladies in her service at least two-thirds had ministered to the passing and transitory fantasies of this nobleman.

" Well, my dear friend," said Florimel, half-rising from his seat and immediately sinking back again, when Mrs. Brace entered the room, " I am come to consult you as usual. You see before you a man completely dependent upon your kind offices to procure him a little variety in the sphere of Venus; for I can assure you that during the last ten days I have not encountered, either in my walks or drives, a single face that has excited a new emotion in my breast."

" Your lordship is greatly to be pitied," observed Mrs. Brace, with a smile.

" Pitied! " he ejaculated; " I am indeed. But permit me to tell you, my good friend," he continued, his eyes settling upon the milliner's ample bust, a considerable portion of which was exposed by the low corsage that was then in fashion, — " permit me to tell you that you are looking quite delightful this evening. One would scarcely believe that you could be seven and twenty," — Florimel knew that she was forty, — " for your complexion is perfectly brilliant, your teeth are like pearls, your eyes flash fires, — yes, fires most wanton and seductive at the same time, — and your hair is radiant in its glossy blackness."

" Is it possible, my dear Florimel," asked Mrs. Brace, with her sweetest smile, — " is it possible that you are going to make love to me, by way of a change? "

" Upon my word, I have very serious thoughts of so doing," responded the young noble, drawing his chair closer to that on which the milliner sat. " Ah! now I have caught a glimpse of your foot and ankle," he exclaimed; "and, in good sooth, you may well be proud — "

" Oh, I am not conceited, I am not vain, Florimel," interrupted Mrs. Brace; for, as the reader may observe, she was on very intimate terms with the youthful noble, though even while she addressed him thus familiarly, it was with an undercurrent of respectful deference in her tone and manner.

" Neither vain nor conceited, my dear friend? " repeated Florimel. " Then you are deserving of the highest commendation, for, as sure as my Christian name is Gabriel, you have every reason to be proud of your personal appearance. A happy man was Mr. Brace when he first led you to the altar — "

" My lord, you are bantering me! " exclaimed the milliner, speaking in so severe a tone and starting with such galvanic suddenness that Florimel, who had been gazing intently upon her foot and ankle, raised his eyes in amazement to her countenance, on which the colour was coming and going with a rapidity of transition that indicated the working of strong emotions in her bosom.

" My dear friend, have I angered you? " asked the young nobleman, taking her hand. " You are well aware that I am incapable of wounding your feelings wantonly — "

" Yes — yes, my lord, — I believe you," interrupted Mrs. Brace. " It was a sudden indisposition — a pang shooting through the head, and which ruffled my temper — "

" Then you forgive me for any indiscretion that I may have committed by so silly an allusion to your late husband? " said Florimel, not altogether believing the story of the sudden indisposition. " However, we will change the conversation," he added, observing that Mrs. Brace darted upon him a look so strange and sinister that it made him feel uneasy. " Let us go back to the object of my visit. I was telling you, my dear friend, that for the last ten days or a fortnight I have not encountered a new face deserving a sigh or worthy of a tender emotion; and it struck me that you might have it in your power — "

" I think that I can put you in the way of an adventure alike original and agreeable," observed Mrs. Brace, who had by this time recovered her wonted equanimity and affability.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Lord Florimel. "Speak — I am dying to hear your explanations."

"Have a little patience," said the milliner, now again smiling sweetly, "and you shall know everything in good time. A certain gay gentleman of my acquaintance has discovered in a secluded wilderness two of the fairest flowers that ever graced the earth with their presence."

"Sisters, doubtless?" observed Florimel, interrogatively.

"Yes, and of a beauty eclipsing all the brilliant charms that dazzle the eye in the circle of fashion," continued Mrs. Brace. "One of these delightful creatures I have already seen — indeed, to speak candidly, she is at this very moment beneath my roof — "

"You are determined to wheedle me out of a hundred guineas to-night!" exclaimed the young nobleman, his cheeks flushing and his eyes beaming with licentious fires.

"Nay, the elder sister is already disposed of," returned Mrs. Brace. "While we are now conversing together she is receiving her first lesson in the school of Venus; but the younger sister shall be yours."

"And is the one whom you thus promise me as charming as the other?" asked the youthful voluptuary.

"I have not seen her yet," responded Mrs. Brace; "but I am assured that she is equal to her sister, and if this be the case, it strikes me that your lordship will have at length found an object on whom your affections will probably settle for a considerable period."

"You enchant me!" ejaculated Florimel. "When and where can I see this angel?"

"Permit me to give you a brief but necessary explanation," said the milliner. "These sisters are the children of a poor but respectable and highly connected gentleman, who is at present away from home. Octavia, the elder, has already fallen into good hands; Pauline, the younger, may belong to you. Octavia, of course, believes that her lover intends to marry her; whereas I need scarcely inform you that nothing is farther from his intention. Last night he declared his affection; to-night she has met him in this house: you may therefore imagine that her heart is very susceptible of the tender passion. It is fair to presume that Pauline may be won with equal ease; and no one is better calculated to achieve such a conquest than yourself."

" I shall undertake it with all the ardour of a most impassioned wooer," exclaimed Lord Florimel.

" Nay, I have thought of a scheme by which the fortress may be surprised and the victory won with ease," observed Mrs. Brace. " Moreover, the adventure which I propose has in it something so romantic, so truly original, so *piquant*, to use a French expression, that I am certain beforehand of the delight with which you will enter into it."

" My curiosity is even painfully excited," cried the young voluptuary.

" Do you not think that you would look well in female attire? " demanded Mrs. Brace, surveying him with an arch smile.

" Oh, now I comprehend you, my dear friend! " exclaimed Florimel. " It will be delicious! A young lady — separated from her mother in a crowd — lost her way — late in the evening — dreadfully alarmed — implores an asylum for the night — "

" Excellent! " cried Mrs. Brace. " Your lordship enters fully into the spirit of my meaning. And now that I have thus far gratified your curiosity, my dear Florimel, you will perhaps grant me your patience while I make a few very necessary observations in connection with these charming sisters. I have already told you that a certain gay gentleman, to whose kind patronage I am as much indebted as to your own, has won the affections of Octavia, the elder; but as cogent reasons will prevent him from visiting her at her own abode when the father returns home, he is naturally desirous that she should consent to meet him here as frequently as it may suit his fancy to receive her. It would, however, be a difficult task for Octavia to remain long and often absent from home, without having the company of her sister; and I have therefore concluded that in order to secure the connivance of Pauline in Octavia's love intrigues, it is absolutely necessary that Pauline herself should be led into a similar adventure. The two sisters will then make confidants of each other, and, by acting in concert, they will set the watchfulness of the father at defiance."

" Most admirably reasoned! " exclaimed Lord Florimel. " Each sister being provided with a lover, they cannot reproach each other, but will mutually assist in the delightful intrigues! I must therefore presume that Octavia's gallant has already recommended you to provide a lover for Pauline; and that you have honoured me with the preference."

"Octavia's admirer consulted me upon the subject just now, before his fair one arrived," answered Mrs. Brace; "and he left it to my discretion to manage matters in such a way that his intrigue with the young lady should be enveloped in as much mystery and shrouded in as much security as possible."

"Then I presume that he is a man of rank, and married to a jealous wife?" said Florimel.

"He is a man of rank, and shortly to be married," responded Mrs. Brace. "But you know that I never mention to the gentlemen of my acquaintance anything that regards each other. 'Honour and secrecy,' — that is my motto, Florimel."

"I am well aware how discreet you are on those points, my dear friend," observed the young nobleman; "and you will give me credit for a total absence of curiosity relative to the affairs of other people. Little does it matter to me who or what Octavia's lover is, so long as I possess the charming Pauline. But you have not yet told me when I am to commence the pleasing adventure which so much suits my fancy."

"In all probability to-morrow evening," answered Mrs. Brace. "I will, however, send you a line in the morning to relieve you from suspense on that head."

"A thousand thanks!" exclaimed the young nobleman. "Bid your messenger wait a few minutes — he shall not return empty-handed."

"You are always generous, my dear Florimel," said the milliner, with one of her sweetest smiles. "Shall I offer you a glass of wine?"

"No; I seldom drink anything stronger than coffee or richer than chocolate," observed the voluptuary, rising from his seat. Then, as he surveyed himself complacently in the mirror over the mantelpiece, he said, "Verily and truly I do believe that I shall look uncommonly pretty, when dressed in female attire. But who is to preside over my toilet? who will arrange my hair?" he demanded, turning abruptly toward the milliner, as the idea flashed to his mind.

"I am afraid that it will prove imperatively necessary for me to enact the part of lady's-maid," answered Mrs. Brace, laughing.

"I could not desire a more charming *cameriste,*" said Florimel, passing his hand gently over her somewhat buxom cheek,— a liberty which the worthy lady did not in the slightest degree resent.

The young nobleman then took his leave, Mrs. Brace attending him as far as the passage leading into the house behind; and when she parted from him, a domestic in handsome livery escorted his lordship to the door opening into St. James's Square.

CHAPTER XV

THE POCKETBOOK

We must now return to Mr. Page, whom we left at the moment when he had succeeded in reaching the George and Blue Boar in safety, after his escape from the dungeon in the eastern district of the metropolis.

On gaining his chamber at the tavern, he hastened to examine the pocketbook which had fallen into his possession in so remarkable a manner; for although it was now three o'clock in the morning, and the commercial traveller was exhausted with the fatigues of the night, his curiosity was such that he could not retire to rest until he had completely gratified it.

Fortunately, the materials for a fire were already laid in the grate in his bedroom; and, applying a light to the fagot whereon the coal was piled up, he soon created a blaze that imparted a genial glow to his frame, which a few minutes before was shivering from head to foot.

Seating himself in a chair drawn up close to the comfortable hearth, Mr. Page proceeded to the inspection of the pocketbook. It was old, — very old, — stained with grease in several places, and worn away at the edges. The strap, or fastening, was torn off; and it was tied around with a ribbon so faded and dirty that it was impossible to conjecture of what colour it had originally been.

Carefully laying the pocketbook open upon the table, the commercial traveller found that it contained several papers, very much soiled, worn, and dingy, and these he examined one after another.

The first appeared to be a small packet, enclosing something soft and elastic to the touch; and on unfolding the two or three pieces of stained and mouldering paper in which the contents were wrapped, Page drew forth a long tress of hair. Though the dust had penetrated to this relic, which was neatly braided, it was nevertheless easy to perceive that the hair was of the darkest hue, and that it was soft as silk; and when the commercial traveller unrolled it carefully in his hands, it measured upwards of two feet in length. Yes, the jetty hue and the velvet softness remained to that hair; but the shining glossiness, which the idea inevitably associated with such a tress, had been dimmed and deadened by the hand of Time!

Having contemplated for several minutes that relic which appeared to tell of the loves and hopes of fond hearts in bygone and better days, the commercial traveller minutely examined the papers which had enveloped it, and on the innermost one he at length succeeded in deciphering the following words, which the lapse of long, long years had all but obliterated:

" Hannah Lightfoot, her hair. St. James's Street, December, 1756. For her well-beloved."

Page started with surprise; for it will be remembered that on the evening when we first introduced him to our readers, in the commercial room at the George and Blue Boar, he related an anecdote, or rather alluded to a rumour, in which the names of George III and Hannah Lightfoot were coupled.

The discovery of this tress, which had no doubt belonged to the beautiful Quakeress of former times, served therefore to give a sharper zest to a curiosity already powerfully excited, and, having restored the hair to its several envelopes, he lost no time in examining the next paper which he took from the pocketbook.

This was but a mere scrap, and, on minutely scrutinizing it, the commercial traveller discovered that it was a memorandum one-half of which was wanting. It seemed as if the fold where the paper was doubled up had so completely worn away that the document had parted in two, one portion whereof Page now held in his hand. But where was the other moiety? Vainly did he search amongst the contents of the pocketbook, — the missing half was not there.

Disappointed and vexed, Page now addressed himself to the task of deciphering the writing on the piece that remained; and after some degree of trouble, — for the traces of the ink were so deadened by time that they appeared only of a dingy brown in some parts and of a light dirty yellow in others, while the paper itself was so discoloured and brittle that it seemed as if it had been scorched at the fire, — the commercial traveller succeeded in making out the following fragment, written in a bold masculine hand:

> "Take notice, all ye whom it
> men, by these presents, that I
> Wales, do hereby declare and a
> and solemnly consider to be my
> heaven and before God, the lik
> Lightfoot, whom I sincerely, te
> all my heart and with all my so
> tenderly, and devotedly loveth
> heart and all her soul: and kno
> it may concern, that I do solem
> myself, before God and in the si
> when the will of the Almighty
> august and well-beloved father
> assent and most gracious permi
> of my marriage with the under
> or, in case of perseverance in th
> grieves me, — then, on my acces
> these realms, on my sire's demi
> I declare that I will, without de
> — and in token that we do alrea
> husband and wife, we have join
> to this document, in the pre
> this third day of April, One Th
> "Witness,
> "William Stamford, Bart."

Nothing could exceed the vexation and disappointment of the commercial traveller when, having perused the above fragment, he again and again sought fruitlessly amongst the contents of the pocketbook for the other half of the paper.

That the document, if perfect, involved an important secret connected with the Court of England, he felt assured; and the circumstance that the paper was witnessed by the late Sir William Stamford seemed to strengthen, at least in the mind of Page, the old standing rumour that there was some extraordinary mystery attached to the birth of the present baronet, Sir Richard. At all events, it was clear that the commercial traveller had become possessed of relics of great interest, if not of value, in connection with the Lightfoot family, and he began to wonder who the old man from whom he had received the pocketbook could possibly have been.

But suddenly abandoning his conjectures, and hoping to find some clue to their elucidation in the contents of the pocketbook itself, the commercial traveller proceeded in his scrutiny thereof.

The next paper that he took up was as dingy, brittle, and soiled as the former; but the writing was more legible. It was a short note, and ran as follows:

"February 9, 1757.

"I have received the letter in which thou revealest to me thy princely rank. I am bewildered — dazzled — stupefied. A consternation is upon me, even while I pen these few lines. But I am writing mechanically, as it were; for not an emotion stirs in my soul. All seems dead within me, save the memory of what has passed — and that appears a dream! It is as if my feelings were lulled into an awful calm, full of dread omen and terrible presentiment. What can this mean? I know not! It is unnatural to a degree. All save my love for thee is dead within me.

"Thine ever,
"H. L.

"To his Royal Highness
"The Prince of Wales."

The handwriting in this letter was in the best, most fluent and most graceful style of female penmanship, and it required not a moment's reflection to convince Page that the authoress could be none other than the beautiful Quakeress, Hannah Lightfoot.

The next paper which he took up was likewise a letter, and its contents ran thus:

" February 11, 1757.

" I am reassured, my well-beloved prince. Thy kindness hath restored me to the enjoyment of the fullest confidence. But thou art wrong to suppose that I ever doubted thine affection. No — it was not thy love concerning which my heart was filled with misgivings: it was respecting thine ability to keep the promise that I was sorely troubled. Now I am happy — the more so that my brother knows all and chides me not. I will keep the appointment which thou hast notified to me in thy most kind letter.

" Adieu, dear prince, until to-morrow evening.

" HANNAH L."

The next paper that the commercial traveller took from his pocketbook was another letter from the Quakeress, and was couched in the ensuing terms :

" My well-beloved prince, — my own dear, dear husband, — thou wilt rejoice in the tidings which I have taken up my pen to impart. I am in the way to become a mother — in a condition which gives me the delicious assurance that I shall in due time present thee with a pledge of my undying, unalterable affection. Lady Stamford is with me at this moment. She is most kind and affectionate toward me. This afternoon I shall accompany her to the manor. She insists upon me paying this visit to her beautiful seat near Aylesbury, and, independently of her great friendship for me, I am the more induced to accept her invitation on account of the sympathy which now exists between us. For it was only yesterday that Lady Stamford perceived that she herself was in a condition calculated to be most pleasing to Sir William, who tenderly loves her; and when we came to compare notes, we found that we both made the same discovery at the same moment. This singular coincidence may appear trifling to dwell upon, dear prince; but it hath made an impression on my mind. Therefore, as thou art to leave town for a few days in attendance on thine august sire, I will, with thy permission, accompany Sir William and Lady Stamford to Aylesbury — promising thee faithfully to return home again by Saturday next, to keep the appointment which thou hast so kindly given me.

" But I cannot conclude this hasty note without renewing the assurances of my unalterable love, and thanking thee most sincerely for the kindred pledges which thou hast recorded in thy most welcome missive of yesterday. I have kissed that dear letter a thousand times. I shall kiss it ten thousand times more ere we meet again, although our separation be but for a few days.

" Ever thine affectionate, loving, and devoted wife,

" HANNAH.

" June 23, 1757."

This letter appeared to contain a startling proof of the marriage of the Quakeress with George III, when he was Prince of Wales. Page referred again to the fragment to which the name of Sir William Stamford appeared as a witness; but he could not satisfy himself as to the date of the year which it bore. Nevertheless, he conjectured that this date must be 1757; and in this case, that fragment might be taken as a clue to the momentous incident filling up the gap between the letter dated February 11th and the one dated June 23d.

Being eager, however, to pursue his research into the extraordinary contents of the pocketbook, the commercial traveller devoted but a very few minutes to conjecture and surmise ere he resumed his investigation. Accordingly, taking up another of the papers, he read as follows:

" STAMFORD MANOR, January 6, 1758.

" Heart-broken — distracted — devoured by grief, I arrived here at eleven o'clock last night. O heaven! that such should be my wretched — wretched fate! Thou hast never loved me — no — thou hast never loved me! I see it all now — my God! I see it all! Wherefore must this eternal separation take place? Hast thou no regard for the feelings of her who is about to become the mother of thy child? Alas! I know not what I write — my tears blind me — my brain is on fire. I fancy that I am going mad! But pardon me — pardon me for these reproaches. I will not erase them — I will not burn this letter, and commence a new one — because I wish that thou should'st perceive how very, very unhappy I really am! Write to me, my husband — No! I must never more call thee by that endearing name. Nevertheless, write to me — write to me! "

This note was without signature; but it was in the same handwriting as the others that bore the name of the unfortunate Hannah Lightfoot.

"January 6, 1758," mused the commercial traveller, as his eyes dwelt upon the date at the head of the letter. "That would be about the period when she must have been in daily expectation of becoming a mother. And she was perhaps confined at Stamford Manor? Ah! everything tends to corroborate the rumour respecting the mystery attending the birth of the present baronet, Sir Richard Stamford. Well, it will be hard if these papers do not serve my turn in some way or another. They are worth buying up, I should think — and who knows but that Mr. J. H. Page may shortly become a rich man? But who could the old man in that miserable chamber have been? Who was that Julia whom he invoked so passionately, and who appeared to have abandoned him in the hour of his dissolution? Fool that I am to ask myself questions to which no power of conjecture or skilfulness of surmise can possibly suggest satisfactory replies! Let me finish my examination of the pocketbook first—and think over the matter afterward."

With these words, muttered to himself in a musing tone, the commercial traveller took up another letter, and he was somewhat surprised and startled when he found that, instead of bearing the slightest relationship to the affair of Hannah Lightfoot, it was addressed to no less a person than "Joseph Warren, at the Beggar's Staff, Horslydown." This document bore the Aylesbury postmark on the outside, and the contents were written in a fluent mercantile hand. The paper itself, though soiled and greasy, was comparatively quite new; the date of the epistle was very recent, and the ink had not lost its blackness.

Page hastened to read this letter, which ran as follows:

"March 17, 1794.

"The terms are accepted. A bank-note for a hundred pounds is enclosed in this letter. You will acknowledge the receipt thereof, directing your reply, as heretofore, to Mr. M——, putting 'private' in the corner outside the letter. We will take three thousand in the first instance, and three thousand more this day six months. You will pack the goods up in a square deal box, the boards of which must be at least three-quarters of an inch thick, and the lid must be well nailed down. Book it per carrier, and print 'C. and Co.' in the corner of the card of address. On receipt of the box, the other hundred pound note shall be duly forwarded."

Page was for some time at a loss to conjecture the meaning of this cautiously worded letter, which had not the writer's name appended to it; but all of a sudden the reminiscence flashed to his mind that Sir Richard Stamford had alluded in his narrative to a certain former transaction which his villainous partners had had with Joe the Magsman, and which related to spurious coin, and a second glance at the letter convinced him that it referred to this affair.

"Yes, 'tis as clear as daylight!" thought Page. "There's the Aylesbury postmark. Mr. M—— means Mr. Martin. The word 'private' was to be placed on the address of the Magsman's reply to prevent any of the clerks in the bank from opening it. The goods meant spurious guineas. Ah! the scoundrels — they're deep enough, God knows! The coin was to be packed in just such a box as that used by London bankers to remit specie — and 'C. and Co.' stood for Coutts and Company. Egad! I see it all. The thing was so managed that when the box arrived at the bank, the cashier would receive and open it in the usual way, under the impression that it had really been sent from Coutts's. Well, the business was superbly done — and those fellows Martin and Ramsey are the cleverest rascals I ever heard of in all my life. But I shall not befriend Sir Richard the less on that account, and this letter will form a link in the chain of evidence against his partners. Now let us see what we have next?"

Thus speaking, the commercial traveller took up another paper, which was a short note in a neat female hand, but bearing no resemblance to the writing in any of the documents which he had previously read. Its contents were as laconic as they were mysterious:

"July 7, 1794.

"The next post will bring you a long letter, full of the necessary explanations. Rub it over with the chemical preparation. I shall see T. M. to-morrow evening.

"L. L."

The envelope which had contained this note was not amongst the papers in the pocketbook, and Page was therefore unable to ascertain to whom it was addressed.

Two papers only now remained to be examined. One was a blank sheet folded in the form of a letter; and although Page held it up to the light and scrutinized it in all possible ways, he could not discover even the slightest trace of writing, nor any sign that the paper had ever been written on at all.

The last item in the contents of this singular pocketbook was a scrap whereon the ensuing lines were scrawled with a pencil evidently guided by a tremulous hand:

"Look under the stone in the farthest corner to the right, in the cellar. Use it wisely, Julia — and you will prosper; act rashly — and you will be ruined."

With the perusal of this laconic and mysterious note ended the commercial traveller's investigation of the pocketbook; and, having locked up the document safely in his trunk, he retired to rest, to dream of the Magsman — Hannah Lightfoot — Sir Richard Stamford — the old man who gave up the ghost in his presence — and, in a word, all the incidents of the last few hours.

But when Mr. Page awoke between nine and ten o'clock he became painfully convinced of the fact that he had caught such a severe rheumatism from the dampness of the dungeon where he had been confined as to render him utterly incapable of rising from his bed. His legs appeared to be completely paralyzed, and his body ached all over, as if he had been soundly thrashed with cudgels.

Under these disagreeable circumstances, he was compelled to remain in bed and have medical advice without delay, while a messenger was despatched to Wood Street to inform Messrs. Hodson and Morley of his return to his quarters at the George and Blue Boar, and likewise to caution them (if it were yet time) not to send the ransom-money to the Beggar's Staff.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PRINCE OF WALES

At about the same hour that Mr. Page awoke to the consciousness of an excruciating rheumatism in all his limbs, the following scene took place in Carlton House.

Picture to yourself, reader, a spacious bedchamber, magnificently furnished and fitted up in the most luxurious style, with a carpet so thick that the feet sank into it as if they were treading on soft sand, and with draperies so ample and rich that the casements were impervious to even the slightest breath of the sharp wintry air.

The couch stood upon a dais or raised platform, which was approached by three steps, and the curtains, of satin and of gold brocade, flowed down from a canopy of purple velvet adorned with a plume of ostrich feathers.

By the side of the bed there was a night-table of rosewood inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and on this were placed two or three bottles of soda-water, a bottle of hock, a small decanter half-filled with brandy, a crystal jug containing the pure element, and several tumblers.

The toilet-table, which stood between the two windows nearest to the bed, was of the most elegant description. A large mirror, set in a gold frame, was fixed on supporters at the back, in such a manner that it could be moved to suit any light prevailing in the room, or any attitude which the individual consulting the glass might choose to take. There were two dressing-cases, both of the finest gold, and the smaller one was embellished around the edges with precious stones. To judge by the number of razors, toothbrushes, combs, hair-brushes, nail-scissors, tweezers for removing superfluous hairs from the nose, boxes of dentifrice, jars of pomatum, perfumed soaps, phials of fragrant oil, bottles of scent, and cosmetics of all descriptions, a stranger would have imagined that this dressing-table was spread for the use of at least a dozen persons; whereas all that luxury of the toilet was prepared for a single individual!

On a large oval table in the middle of the chamber lay a miscellaneous collection of articles which to some extent bespoke the tastes of their royal owner, and in other respects served as an index to that wanton extravagance which lavished the gold wrung from the very vitals of the toiling millions, as if it were so much dross to be had for the mere trouble of stooping to pick it up. Boxing-gloves, foils, small swords, and single-sticks, riding and hunting whips, gold and silver spurs, new bridles, jockeys' caps, and two or three pairs of white leathern tops for boots, fowling-pieces, duelling-pistols, rifles, powder-horns, shot-belts, and new flints for the locks of the firearms, a pile of indecent pictures just imported from Paris, — and the more calculated to inflame the imagination because the designs and the colouring were executed with an artistic perfection and a natural truthfulness well worthy of better subjects, — several elegantly bound books, the contents of which would bring a blush to the cheeks of even the inmates of a brothel, a quantity of China monsters, which were much in vogue in those days and fetched an immense price, watches, rings, breastpins, stars, orders, and diamond garters, — all heaped pell-mell as if they were things of no worth, — exquisite specimens of the beautiful art of carving in ivory, displayed in miniature figures representing the most eminent actresses of the age, curious articles of virtu, — such as old coins, fragments of weapons used by the ancient Britons, pieces of pottery dug up from the ruins of a Roman villa, and even Catholic relics for which enormous sums had been given, — innumerable letters and *billets-doux*, from a countless host of ladies, and all scattered in the greatest confusion, some of them indeed never having been read, while out of others peeped locks of hair, — such were the principal items in that miscellaneous collection which covered the table in the centre of the room.

On a chiffonier placed between two of the windows stood a large and remarkably handsome writing-desk, of a dark wood inlaid with golden ornaments of exquisite and very curious workmanship, and the lock was contrived in such a manner that no other key would fit than the one specially made for the purpose. This key the prince invariably wore fastened to a thin but strong chain underneath his waistcoat; for the desk contained papers of great importance.

To the walls of the chamber were suspended several pictures, all painted by eminent men, but all most voluptuous in the subjects which they represented. Lucretia struggling in the arms of Tarquin; Cleopatra pillowing the head of Mark Antony upon her naked bosom; Mars and Venus ensnared in the invisible net which Vulcan had spread upon the couch of their amorous dalliance; the beautiful Andromeda bound in a state of utter nudity to a rock, and left as a prey to the monster from which Perseus rescues her; Ariadne wandering in an equally primitive condition on the shores of Chio, when abandoned by Theseus; a beautiful woman struggling in the lascivious embraces of a satyr, — these were the principal subjects of the pictures.

In addition to the door by which this royal bedchamber was usually entered, there were two others. One communicated with a private staircase, to which we shall have to allude more than once in the course of our narrative; the other led into a bathroom fitted up with Oriental splendour, and adorned with full-length mirrors in every direction. Voluptuous ottomans, a buffet covered with wines and delicious beverages, vases filled with perfumes, and an atmosphere warmed by artificial means, rendered this bathing-place so perfect in its luxury that the most fastidious and the most difficult to please could not find a single fault.

It was between nine and ten o'clock in the morning, as we have already intimated, when the Prince of Wales awoke in the sumptuous couch which stood upon the dais in the bedchamber. Opening his eyes languidly, his Royal Highness pressed his hand to his brow — for he had sat up until a late hour, and had imbibed a sufficiency of curaçoa punch to leave behind the evaporating fumes even a far more racking headache than he now actually experienced.

Raising himself indolently in his bed, the prince poured some hock into a large tumbler, then emptied therein the contents of a bottle of soda-water, and drank the delicious beverage ere its effervescence had time to subside.

In a few minutes the prince consulted an elegant gold repeater set round with brilliants, and, finding that it was close upon ten o'clock, he rang a bell by means of a silken cord which hung between the curtains and the wall.

A French valet, dressed in plain black, but with the greatest neatness and precision, and whose age was about thirty, instantly answered the summons.

" Germain," said the Prince of Wales, " the morning is very cold — is it not? "

" Very cold, your Royal Highness," answered the dependent, who spoke English without the slightest foreign accent.

" Then light the fire," continued the prince.

This command was immediately obeyed, and in a few moments the flames went rushing up the wide-mouthed chimney with a cheerful sound.

" Tell me, Germain," said George, after a pause, " was I very particularly drunk last night? Speak candidly now — and without any nonsense."

" Your Royal Highness was certainly not sober," responded the valet, in a submissive tone.

" Damn the sobriety! " ejaculated the prince, impatiently. " I know perfectly well that I was far from sober — but I wish to be informed whether I was helpless or incapable."

" I had the honour of supporting your Royal Highness hither," said Germain.

" And of putting me into bed — eh? " cried the prince.

" I experienced that honour likewise," answered the valet.

" Then I must have been damnation drunk — and there is no longer any doubt upon the point," said George. " But this soda-water lies disagreeably cold upon my stomach. Give me a little drop of brandy, Germain."

This order was obeyed, and the prince swallowed the dram with a relish.

" Now unlock the door leading to the private staircase," continued the prince. " I am expecting Mr. Meagles, and he will breakfast with me."

" Your Royal Highness will take breakfast in bed? " observed the valet, interrogatively.

" No; I shall rise and have a bath first," was the reply. "But you will not serve up breakfast until eleven, and in the meantime I shall not want you."

Germain unlocked the door communicating with the secret stairs, and then withdrew.

In two or three minutes the sound of voices, mingled with subdued laughter, reached the ears of the prince, who started up in his bed, muttering to himself in a tone of vexation, " That damned fool Meagles is up to some of his tricks again — and yet I enjoined him to come alone! "

Scarcely had he thus given vent to his annoyance, when the door which Germain had so recently unlocked was opened, the velvet curtain covering it was thrust aside, and a gentleman made his appearance. But instead of immediately advancing to pay his respects to the prince, he held the drapery back from the door until the person by whom he was accompanied had likewise emerged from the secret staircase and had entered the chamber.

But ere we allow these newcomers to proceed a step farther, we must tell the reader something about them.

First and foremost, then, we introduce to public notice Mr. Timothy Meagles, or, as his friends called him, plain Tim Meagles. He was an individual of about thirty years of age, — short in stature, of slight and dapper build, but endowed with great physical strength. His face was marked with the smallpox; but he had expressive blue eyes, a fine set of teeth, and an enormous pair of well-curled auburn whiskers, so that he could not be pronounced positively ugly. It is true that his hair was of a fiery red, and that there was something coarse, if not actually vulgar, in the expression of his countenance; nevertheless, he was not without his admirers amongst the fair sex, and when he rode his splendid iron gray in the park, he received a gracious bow from more than one lady of quality. Amongst the noblemen and gentlemen of fashion he was a special favourite, — not merely because he was known to enjoy the friendship of the prince, but likewise because he was a very good fellow in many ways. For if any one required a second in a duel, to whom could he better apply than Tim Meagles? If an umpire were wanted at a prize-fight or a pigeon-match, who was more competent than Tim Meagles? Behold him on the race-course — or out with the hounds — and it would do your heart good to contemplate the spirit with which the sport was entered into by Tim Meagles. Again, who could sing a better song or make a more fluent speech after dinner than this gentleman of such numerous qualifications? Who could drink his three bottles of wine and make more sure of going home sober than Tim Meagles? His taste was as excellent in the choice of wines as his judgment was unquestionable with regard to horse-flesh. He could drive a four-in-hand or a tandem with equal proficiency. At steeplechases he performed such wonderful feats that it appeared as if himself and his horse were possessed of a hundred lives apiece; and in swimming, leaping, running, boxing, fencing, wrestling, and all kinds of gymnastics, as well as manly sports, Tim Meagles was unapproachable by any of his friends or acquaintances. He was, moreover, reckoned a crack shot with either gun or pistol; and in respect to the " laws of honour " he was a peripatetic code.

But these qualifications, numerous though they be, do not make up half the sum of those possessed by Mr. Timothy Meagles. He was a most convenient and useful personage to the Prince of Wales, who in many instances would not have known what to do without him. Did his Royal Highness get into a scrape with the friends of some lady whom he had seduced, Tim Meagles was employed to hush the matter up. Did the illustrious spendthrift require money, Tim Meagles was indefatigable in his search after some capitalist to advance a loan. And on more occasions than one had this same universal and ubiquitous agent conveyed the prince's plate or Mrs. Fitzherbert's jewelry to a certain celebrated pawnbroker in the Strand. In fact, Tim Meagles's services were as varied and numerous as his qualifications or his resources. He was never at a loss for the means of carrying out anything which he undertook. His ingenuity in concocting plans was only equalled by his perseverance in pursuing an object until its final attainment. Nothing could daunt his courage or damp his spirits, and the greater the obstacles he had to encounter, the more energetic became his mode of action. It was all the same to him whether he had to console a forlorn and deserted fair one, or to thrash a bailiff, and his tact in hushing up a love-affair was as admirable as his skill in appeasing a clamorous creditor.

The prince not only retained him as an able instrument, but liked him as a good fellow and a pleasant companion; and it was sufficient that he thus patronized Tim Meagles, to induce all the friends and acquaintances of his Royal Highness to treat that useful individual as an equal. It was true that Tim loved a lark above all things, and did not much mind on whom he played off his practical jokes; but no one dared to frown on one who basked in the smiles of royalty, and thus Mr. Meagles was not only tolerated in fashionable life, but actually courted.

At the time when we introduce him to our readers he had been about three years on this footing of intimacy with the prince, who had picked him up at some race-course. What he was previously, we are at present unable to state; but this much we can aver in his favour, that however poor his origin might have been, he never boasted of either birth or wealth. Indeed, he possessed no ostensible source of income, beyond the remuneration which he received from the prince and the money he picked up by betting, gambling, and similar pursuits. At the same time, no one could utter a word against his character, although prudent fathers and mothers who possessed marriageable daughters did not look very well pleased if the young ladies happened to flirt with Mr. Timothy Meagles.

Such was the gentleman whom the prince was expecting to breakfast on the morning of which we are writing. But who was the companion of Mr. Meagles on this occasion? We will enlighten our readers on that point, and then pursue the continuous thread of our narrative.

CHAPTER XVII

AN AMAZON

About thirty-five years previous to the date mentioned at the opening of this tale, a certain Letitia Fluke was born in a miserable attic in Lukner's Lane, St. Giles's. As she grew up, she became remarkable for the beauty of her person, the masculine energy of her character, and the profligacy of her morals. Seduced by Rann, the celebrated highwayman who bore the sobriquet of "Sixteen-string Jack," she lived with him as his mistress for some time; and being endowed with extraordinary intelligence, she taught herself not only the rudiments of a good education, but likewise acquired the facility of expressing herself with grammatical accuracy and conversational elegance. After passing through various gradations, she married Sir John Lade, a wealthy and amorous baronet who was old enough to be her grandfather; and, on becoming Lady Letitia Lade, she soon wheedled herself into that sort of society at the West End which may be described as "not overparticular." Her great personal beauty, splendid figure, easy virtue, and proficiency in all the sports of the field rendered her a special favourite with the dashing noblemen and gentlemen about town, and her reputation as a huntress was second only to that of her friend Tim Meagles as a hunter. She rode exquisitely — was always one of the foremost in at the death — and could leap a five-barred gate or practise any of the most daring feats characteristic of steeplechasing.

This lady was it whom Meagles had brought with him to the prince's room on the present occasion. She was, however, dressed in male attire, which became her admirably, and had it not been for the fulness of her bosom she might have been taken by a stranger for a man, though, as a matter of course, it would have been a man of beardless face and of rather effeminate appearance. As it was, she looked like a modern Diana the Huntress; for she had spurs upon her boots and carried a riding-whip in her hand, and her form, though robust and vigorous, was admirably symmetrical, while all her movements were characterized by a graceful ease. Nothing could exceed the elegance of her costume. The hat, with its broad brim, set off her handsome countenance to the greatest advantage, and when she removed it on entering the chamber her magnificent black hair showered in a myriad glossy ringlets over her broad and sloping shoulders. The blue frock coat, braided most elaborately in front, fitted close to her form, developing the contours of her swelling hips and giving a wasp-like appearance to the waist; while the gray small-clothes and the polished Hessian boots, with their tassels and spurs, completed an attire at once tasteful and becoming. Being tall in stature, Lady Letitia had a masculine air, and enacted the part of " the man " to perfection, the robust proportions and straightness of her limbs, with the solid firmness of the flesh, giving a fulness of shape to her entire person and rendering ample justice to the excellent " fit " of her garments.

Having admitted his disguised companion into the royal bedchamber, Tim Meagles closed and locked the door by which they had thus entered; and bursting into a hearty laugh as he approached the couch, he exclaimed, " My dear prince, you seem to stare at my friend here as if you had never seen him before in all your life."

" And who the devil is it? " demanded his Royal Highness, sitting up in bed, while his countenance wore an expression which showed that he was half-inclined to be angry. " Why! by heavens — 'tis a woman," he exclaimed, as Letitia advanced toward him. Then, his features expanding into a smile, he said, " Ah! my beautiful huntress — I recognize you now! Well, I suppose Meagles has brought you to breakfast with me — and this is an unexpected pleasure."

" Your Royal Highness is very kind thus to receive me," returned Letitia, her smile revealing a set of large but brilliant teeth. " It was not my fault — Meagles would insist upon bringing me — and your Royal Highness knows what a harum-scarum fellow he is."

"Egad! I was quite sure that you would be welcome," exclaimed Meagles, taking up a foil from the table and making a sham thrust at her ladyship. "Only conceive," he added, turning toward the prince, who was surveying with gloating eyes the fine form of the huntress, "I met our fair friend here as she was coming from her morning's ride — "

"I was just about to put up my horse in the stables in King Street," interrupted Lady Letitia; "for I went out alone for a good scamper at daybreak, and when I came back, there was not a groom nor even a boy in attendance to take the animal from me."

"Well — and I offered to unsaddle him for you," said Meagles.

"But I did it for myself while you were thinking about it," responded the lady, as she gave her friend a real lash with her riding-whip in acknowledgment of the sham thrust he had made at her.

"Don't spare him!" cried the prince, laughing heartily as Tim Meagles vainly cut a caper to avoid the blow. "But had I anticipated the pleasure of your company, my dear Letitia, I would have risen to receive you. Indeed, I ordered Germain not to make his appearance with breakfast until eleven, though I knew that Meagles would be here at ten — because I had resolved to take a bath in the interim."

"Treat me just as if I were one of your own sex," exclaimed the lady; "and have your bath, by all means. Here, I will give you your dressing-gown and slippers," she continued, throwing the former upon the bed and placing the latter in a convenient position on the carpet by the side of the couch.

"And you mean me to rise in your presence?" asked the prince, laughingly.

"Why not?" demanded Letitia. "You do not suppose that I shall go home and tell the baronet that I have had the honour of assisting at the toilet of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales?"

"Egad! you are quite capable of telling your husband anything," exclaimed Meagles, putting on a pair of boxing-gloves and attacking an imaginary antagonist in a most scientific fashion.

"You are very brave in buffeting the empty air, Tim," said Lady Letitia; " but if you really want some one to spar with you, I don't mind gratifying you in that way; " and as she thus spoke, the Amazon threw down her riding-whip, and thrust her hands into a pair of pugilistic gloves.

" This is excellent! " cried the prince, leaping from his couch, and putting on the figured silk dressing-gown and the embroidered morocco slippers which the lady had placed within his reach.

But while he was thus employed, the huntress had turned her back toward him, inasmuch as she had commenced a regular sparring match with Tim Meagles, who very complacently allowed her to buffet him about to her heart's content, though, had he chosen to exercise his skill in the art of self-defence, she would never have had a chance of even hitting him a single blow.

Presently Tim Meagles began to retreat rapidly, then he darted aside with an abrupt movement, then he leaped and capered all about the room in order to weary his fair antagonist, both of them highly enjoying the sport, while the Prince of Wales was equally amused as a spectator. At last, the humourous Meagles put an end to the fun by suddenly dealing Lady Letitia a blow on the forehead, which knocked her flat down upon her back; but she rose laughing heartily, and, throwing aside the gloves, declared that she had had enough of boxing for the present occasion.

" Now we'll take a little drop of brandy, my brave Amazonian friend," exclaimed Meagles; and filling a couple of wine-glasses, he handed one to Lady Letitia, who tossed off the contents without winking. " By the bye, I quite forgot you, my dear prince," observed Tim, turning toward his Royal Highness. " Shall I pour out a thimbleful? "

" No, not at present, Meagles," was the reply. " I have had my hock and soda-water, and a dram to sink it, and I therefore think that I shall be able to manage very well until after breakfast. But now for my bath," added the prince, gathering his ample dressing-gown around his somewhat portly form, and descending from the dais.

" I envy your Royal Highness the possession of a bathing-room contiguous to your sleeping-chamber," said Lady Letitia. " I must positively make Sir John have one fitted up for me," she added, exchanging a rapid glance of intelligence with Meagles.

"Have you ever seen my bathroom?" inquired the prince.

"Only as I catch a glimpse of it now through the half-open door," responded the Amazon. "Your Royal Highness must recollect that this is the first time I have had the honour of being admitted to your private apartments."

"And it need not be the last," observed George, bending upon her a significant look; for although he had known the lady for two or three years, she had never struck him as being so handsome as she appeared on the present occasion.

"Excellent!" cried the huntress, laughing. "The prince is paying me compliments!"

"Compliments? No, I am telling you truths," said George.

"Do you persist in forgetting that I am a gentleman for the nonce?" and again she laughed.

"There, now!" cried Meagles, who had been pretending to be very busy in examining the lock of one of the prince's rifles for the last two or three minutes, "I knew that your Royal Highness would not be displeased with me bringing Lady Letitia hither this morning."

"Displeased!" ejaculated George, "I am delighted! But will you inspect my bathroom before I enter it?" he asked, turning again toward the lovely Amazon.

"Before you enter it?" repeated the lady, as if she had not heard aright. "Why should you stand upon any such ceremony with me? I cannot succeed in persuading you to forget that my attire is unsuited to my sex."

"It becomes you admirably, at all events," observed the prince, advancing close up to the huntress, who was leaning negligently against the toilet-table. Then, proffering her his hand, he said, "Permit me to show you my bathroom."

"Oh, with much pleasure!" exclaimed Lady Letitia. "It will perhaps afford me a hint for the establishment of some humble imitation at my own town residence."

Thus speaking, the Amazon accompanied the prince into the adjacent chamber; and when he closed the door behind him, she affected not to perceive the incident.

"Well, upon my word, your Royal Highness possesses a perfect Oriental bathing-room," she observed, throwing herself on one of the voluptuous ottomans and surveying the place in a leisurely and altogether unembarrassed manner.

"It is really a delightful scene, exquisitely fitted up, and evincing in every detail that fine taste for which your Royal Highness is so justly celebrated."

"I am pleased that you admire my bathroom," said the prince, seating himself by her side. "Can you not for the moment fancy that you are in some apartment attached to the harem of a Turkish palace?"

"Never having been in the Mussulman's country, I cannot precisely make so free with my imagination," answered the huntress, in a lively tone. "At the same time, from all I have read, I could, without a very large stretch of the fancy, conceive your Royal Highness to be a Sultan in *déshabillé*," she added, with a significant glance at the prince's figured silk dressing-gown and embroidered red morocco slippers.

"I am perfectly willing that you should entertain such a belief, on condition that you permit me to exercise my fancy with regard to yourself," exclaimed George, his eyes wandering over the form of the huntress.

"Oh, certainly — I cannot have the least objection!" she cried, "especially after having compared you to the Grand Turk. And now tell me, pray, for what you are inclined to take me?"

"For my Sultana of an hour," responded the prince, throwing his arms around Lady Letitia's neck.

"You are determined to make me feel that I am a woman, in spite of my male attire," she exclaimed, laughing.

We must, however, leave the prince and the huntress in the bathroom, and return to Mr. Meagles, who, at the moment when they were quitting the bedchamber, was to all appearances very busily engaged in examining the miscellaneous articles strewed upon the central table.

Nor did he desist from his occupation as soon as he found himself alone; for he thought it probable that the prince might return to fetch something, or to give him instructions relative to the exclusion of any one who might seek admission to the bedchamber. He accordingly remained at the table, and began to examine the indecent French prints, which he had not seen before, as they had only arrived on the previous day. They were not, however, much to his taste; for Tim Meagles was too ardent and impassioned a votary at the shrine of Venus to need any stimulant of the kind for the purpose of exciting his imagination. Besides, he had a certain important object in view, and which engrossed his thoughts. He therefore turned the prints over in a listless manner, and very shortly passed from them to the inspection of the firearms. These he scrutinized with less abstraction of mind, for there were several new fowling-pieces and pistols which he had not seen before.

But when about a quarter of an hour had elapsed, Tim Meagles suddenly raised his eyes, looked around him, and then listened. All was still; and then the next instant the Amazon's clear, merry, musical laugh, ringing from the bathroom, met Meagles's ears. A cloud swept over his countenance, for Tim Meagles, although he had long been on terms of the most tender intimacy with her, was for a moment annoyed at himself for having purposely brought her to Carlton House on the present occasion with the view of throwing her into the arms of the prince.

But this feeling of jealousy was as evanescent as, under the circumstances, it was absurd; and it was instantaneously succeeded by a lively satisfaction, as he thought to himself, "She has played her cards admirably, and she will succeed in engrossing the prince's attention during the half-hour that I enjoined her to be sure and keep him engaged!"

Thus rejoicing in the success of a prearranged stratagem, Tim Meagles advanced to the royal couch, and took from beneath the pillow a long, thin gold chain to which a key of very peculiar workmanship was attached.

He then approached the writing-desk to which we have already alluded; and having carefully opened it, he proceeded to examine several small packets of papers, which were tied round with pink ribbon, and bore endorsements indicative of the various matters to which they respectively referred. But while thus occupied, he more than once cast an anxious look toward the door of the bathroom. His apprehensions were not, however, verified by any sudden interruption on the part of the prince.

His search in the two compartments of the desk lasted for upwards of ten minutes, there being numerous packets of papers, which he examined one after the other until nearly the whole were thus disposed of, and still he had not lighted on the particular parcel which he sought. He now began to fear that it might not be in the desk at all; and yet he knew full well that the prince kept every document of an important or private nature there. But, as it frequently happens in such cases, the very last packet which Tim Meagles drew from the desk bore the endorsement that he had hitherto so vainly sought; and having secured this little parcel about his person, he rearranged all the others, locked the desk, and restored the key to its place of concealment under the pillow of the couch.

For a few moments a smile of triumph played upon the lips of Tim Meagles; but it almost immediately yielded to that calm, free and easy, and independent expression which was the natural characteristic of his features. Drawing a large armchair close to the fire, he deposited himself indolently in the luxurious seat, and lighted a cigar.

In a few minutes the door of the bathroom opened, and Lady Letitia came forth, followed by the prince. Not a blush appeared upon her cheek, not the slightest embarrassment marked her manner, as she emerged from the bathing-room; but Meagles turned an arch look upon the prince, exclaiming, " Well, are you displeased with me for having brought our Amazonian friend this morning? "

" Hold your tongue, Tim," cried the lady, laughing. " Ah! I thought I smelt the delightful flavour of the weed. I will keep you company with a cigar, while the prince dresses himself — and then for breakfast. I already feel as hungry as a hunter."

" Or a huntress — which? " observed Meagles.

" Both," replied Lady Letitia, throwing herself upon a chair opposite to her humourous friend; then, taking an elegant ivory case from the pocket of her frock coat, she drew forth a little Spanish cigarette, which she lighted by the aid of Meagles's full-flavoured Havana.

" And so you smoke, Letitia, do you? " asked the prince.

" Your Royal Highness sees that I can manage a cigarette," responded the huntress, " but barely a cigar. And as for tobacco — I mean as it is smoked in a pipe — pah! the idea makes me feel — "

" Not sick," interjected Meagles; " but only as if you would spoil your beautiful teeth. It's all vanity on your part, my beauty! and if it wasn't for the teeth you'd be smoking the strongest cavendish, I know! "

The huntress laughed, and then gave Tim a tap on the cheek, which compliment he returned by means of a somewhat hard smack upon the lady's back; whereupon she dealt him so sound a box on the ears that all the blood in his body seemed in a moment to rise into his cheeks and stagnate there. But the next instant he burst out laughing, and the prince as well as the Amazon herself shared in the merriment.

A quarter of an hour was thus whiled away by means of smoking, jesting, and chattering; and in the interval the Prince of Wales had made such improvements in his toilet that he now appeared in an elegant *déshabillé.* Germain shortly afterward entered the room, bearing a large silver tray containing the breakfast-things; and although he observed Lady Letitia and instantly recognized her, he nevertheless affected to take no more notice of her presence than if she were a phantom visible only to the prince and Meagles. For Germain was a very discreet Frenchman; otherwise he would not have long held the post of *valet intime*, or rather " confidential gentleman," about the person of the Prince of Wales.

An elegant breakfast was now served up, and to which both Lady Letitia and Tim Meagles did ample justice; but George had indulged overnight too liberally in curaçoa punch to be able to eat with any degree of appetite in the morning.

" You don't seem to be peckish, my dear prince," observed Meagles, as he committed a second and very desperate assault upon a cold partridge pie.

" You made the punch too strong last night, Tim," answered his Royal Highness.

" Not a bit of it! " cried Meagles. " By the bye, my dear prince," he continued, turning toward his Royal Highness, " I missed you from a quarter to six to nearly half-past ten last evening — "

" And you are very likely to miss me for precisely the same period this evening, Mr. Meagles," interrupted the prince, suddenly assuming a tone that had just sufficient haughtiness in it to serve as a tacit intimation that the subject was not be dwelt upon.

" Then, instead of taking an early dinner with your Royal Highness, I shall fasten myself upon the hospitality of our Amazonian friend here," remarked Meagles, who understood the hint to abandon the delicate topic which he had touched upon, but who did not choose to appear disconcerted by the reproof that he had received.

" But I shall expect you at midnight, Tim," exclaimed the prince, resuming his familiarity of manner as suddenly and as easily as he had thrown it aside for a momentary purpose; besides, it would not at all have suited his views to quarrel with an agent who was invaluable to him. " You and I shall be alone together to-night, Tim," he continued; " and then I will explain to you a little service that I require at your hands."

" Well, I don't mind promising to be here at midnight," said Meagles, who never chose to let it appear that he was servile in his attendance upon the prince, or that he was a mere toad-eater constantly ready at the beck and call of his illustrious patron. " And now," he exclaimed, pushing away his plate, " we will have a drop of kirchwasser after this famous breakfast."

Thus speaking, he filled three liqueur-glasses with the potent cordial; and Lady Letitia tossed off her dram with as much real gusto as her two companions.

Shortly afterward the Amazon and Tim Meagles took their departure by the private staircase; and the Prince of Wales rang the bell to desire the attendance of his secretary with the morning's newspapers and letters.

CHAPTER XVIII

PAULINE

It was about seven o'clock in the evening, and Pauline was seated by the fire in the front parlour of the villa. She was not merely alone in that room, but likewise in the house; for the charwoman had taken her departure some hours previously, and Octavia had been absent since five.

We do not pretend to know — at least for the present — what excuse the elder sister had made for thus leaving home for two evenings running, and for several hours on each occasion; but certain it is that Pauline was well satisfied, and entertained not the least idea of the real motive of Octavia's proceedings.

And now she was seated by the fire, as above stated, and occupied with her needle, not on fine work, but in the repairs of the household linen; for although our readers may smile at our minuteness of detail in this respect, we can assure them that we have only mentioned the circumstance in order to enhance their good opinion of the charming girl who thus sought to make up by her own thrift for the slenderness of her father's income. And as Pauline's tall and elegant figure was slightly inclined over her occupation, and the cheerful light of the fire streamed with Rembrandt effect upon her lovely countenance, she appeared far more interesting and attractive than she would have done if lounging on a luxurious sofa, attired in the richest style of fashion, and embellished with artificial ornaments. For not more beauteous in its glossy luxuriance would have seemed that dark brown hair, though sparkling with gems; not more fair nor polished would have been that brow, though crowned with a tiara of diamonds; nor more pure and stainless would have appeared that white neck, though adorned with brilliants worth a monarch's ransom.

Softly, how softly, did her long black lashes seem to repose on her fair cheeks, as she sat with her deep blue eyes fixed upon her work. Rich with the hues of health, and delicate with the purity of a taintless complexion, were the cheeks whereon those lashes rested, and, oh, how beautiful was the entire countenance!

Gracefully rounded, too, were the plump white arms, as Pauline plied her needle with the tapering fingers, the rosy nails of which were as exquisite in their almond shape and as well cared for as if they belonged to a duchess.

There was a smile of sweet contentment upon the moist red lips, which were just so slightly parted by that angelic expression as to afford a glimpse of the teeth that were faultlessly even, stainlessly perfect, and white as the pearls of the East; and from between those lips came the sweet breath as if from the dewy leaves of the rose, and mixing in balmy fragrance with the air.

When, ever and anon, she raised her eyes from her work, they appeared radiant in their very softness; for no infelicitous reflections, no stormy emotions, no harassing thoughts were harboured in her bosom, nor was her mind jarred with the conflict of strong passions.

Such was the charming creature against whose innocence and whose peace an infernal plot was already in train; and now do we tremble for thee, thou beauteous Pauline!

It was, as we said, about seven o'clock on the evening in question, when a loud and impatient double knock at the front door startled Pauline from her work; and she hastened to answer the summons, her heart fluttering with the hope that it was her father who had returned.

But she was disappointed in this respect, for a young lady appeared upon the threshold; and the moment Pauline opened the door, the stranger said, in an anxious and appealing tone, " May I beseech you to grant me refuge for a few minutes and to shield me against the insults of ruffians in the garb of gentlemen? "

Pauline gave a ready assent to the prayer; and the stranger was instantaneously admitted into the parlour.

This apparent young lady was in reality no less a person than Lord Florimel; and, thanks to the taste and ingenuity of Mrs. Brace, his disguise was complete. His rich chestnut hair was curled into a thousand ringlets that showered from beneath an elegant gipsy hat over his shoulders; and the black silk gown which he wore came high up to the very throat and was artistically padded in the corsage. The ample shawl was arranged with the utmost precision; and Florimel's feet and ankles appeared femininely diminutive in the silk stockings and neat boots which encased them. Altogether, he seemed and acted the well-bred lady to perfection.

Pauline hastened to place a chair near the fire for his accommodation; and then, resuming her own seat, appeared to await any explanatory remarks that he might choose to offer.

Florimel affected to be greatly agitated; and Pauline not only begged him to lay aside his bonnet, or rather gipsy hat, but actually rose and unfastened the ribbons with her own hands. Then, as the young nobleman felt the fingers of the beauteous girl touching his cheeks, and her form coming in contact with him as she thus rendered her aid to one whom she believed to be of her own sex, his blood began to circulate like lightning in his veins; and as he gazed up at the heavenly countenance which bent over him, while her very breath fanned his face, he experienced feelings of a softer, more tender, and purer nature than he had ever known before.

The bonnet was laid aside; and Pauline, as she resumed her seat, could not help thinking what a beautiful head of hair her visitor possessed. Moreover, there was something in Florimel's appearance which enlisted her sympathies in his favour; and as she cast a rapid glance at his pleasing features, she thought that she beheld in them the indications of many engaging and amiable qualities.

"I know not how to thank you sufficiently for your kindness toward me," said the young nobleman, rendering his naturally melodious voice as femininely subdued in tone as possible. "But what can have become of my dear mother?" he exclaimed, suddenly reassuming an air of painful agitation. "Surely those rude people cannot have ill-treated her?"

"Compose yourself, my dear young lady," said Pauline, rising from her seat. "I will cheerfully go and look for your mother — "

" Not for worlds, sweet miss, would I have you stir out on my account," interrupted Florimel. " There are several insolent men, who appeared to be very tipsy, parading up and down the road; and they pursued my mother and myself for a considerable distance. At length they rudely assaulted us, and we were separated. I fled in affright, hastening I knew not whither, and so bewildered and confused that I did not observe for several minutes that I was alone. You may conceive my terror when on stopping short, breathless and exhausted, I found that my mother was lost to my view. At the same instant I heard rapid footsteps approaching, and, dreading further outrage, I ventured to seek a refuge in your house, where I perceived light gleaming through the shutters. That refuge you have generously accorded; and now suffer me to become acquainted with the name of my kind hostess, that I may mention it again with gratitude elsewhere."

" My name is Pauline Clarendon," was the answer. " I regret that my father should be absent in the country, for, were he here, he would speedily consign to the hands of justice the insolent brawlers who have thus outraged you."

" Permit me, my dear Miss Clarendon," said the nobleman, who had thus acquired the assurance that her father was not at home, — " permit me to proffer you my friendship and solicit yours in return. My name is Gabriel Florimel — "

" Oh, what a charming name! " ejaculated Pauline, quite involuntarily. " Gabrielle Florimel," she repeated in a musing tone, and with that stress upon the final syllable of the Christian name which showed that she took it in the feminine gender.

" Yes, Gabrielle Florimel," said the nobleman, instantly adopting the same pronunciation, which consisted merely in laying a stronger emphasis on the " el." " I am delighted that you are pleased with my name. Yours is not less beautiful — Pauline Clarendon."

" Pardon me, Miss Florimel," said the young lady, hastily, " for having been so thoughtless and frivolous as to dwell on a name, when I should be thinking how I can best aid you in your present embarrassment. You will not permit me to go out and look for your mother? It is true that I am unacquainted with her person, but if she be wandering about in search of you, she might accost me to ask if I had seen any one answering your description — "

" I again repeat, my dear Miss Clarendon," interrupted Florimel, " that I should never forgive myself if I allowed you to venture abroad and incur the chance of receiving such insults as those from which I have escaped. No, pray remain at home, and permit me to stay with you a little while."

" With infinite pleasure, Miss Florimel," said the amiable Pauline. " But your mother — will she not be uneasy? "

" She will hasten home, making sure that I have gone thither," answered the young nobleman. " But it is a long way off, in the immediate vicinity of Blackheath, and I tremble at the idea of returning all by myself into such a lonely neighbourhood. The hackney-coachmen are all connected with robbers and bad people — "

" Do not distress yourself, my dear Miss Florimel," said Pauline, in a voice expressive of deep interest; for the wily nobleman had made these observations in such a melancholy and plaintive tone that the generous-hearted Miss Clarendon was profoundly touched by the apparently painful embarrassment in which her new friend was involved.

" I thank you sincerely for your sweet sympathy," returned Florimel; " but how am I to act? " Then, after a few moments' seeming reflection, he said, " If I only knew of some respectable lodging-house in the neighbourhood where I could obtain a bed — "

" Oh, if that be all," interrupted Pauline, in the most cheerful tone that ever expressed a winning hospitality of disposition, " your difficulties are at an end. There is a spare bed in this house at your service, my father being absent; and my sister, whom I expect home at about eleven, will be as much rejoiced as myself to harbour you as a guest."

" Your kindness is such that I know not how to find words sufficient to acknowledge it," observed Florimel, inwardly rejoicing at the success which his stratagem was thus experiencing step by step. But when he fixed his eyes upon the lovely being seated opposite to him, and read all the goodness of her heart in the lineaments of her candid and ingenuous countenance, and while the musical tones of her sweet voice yet sounded in his ears, and her gay and innocent smile appeared to beam upon him with a species of heavenly influence, a sudden pang shot through his breast at the idea of the black treachery of his present conduct.

But, thrusting aside these unpleasant reflections, as a man brushes off a loathsome cobweb from the leaves of a charming rose which he desires to pluck, the youthful voluptuary continued the discourse in a cheerful tone.

Playing his part with the utmost caution, he measured every word that he uttered, calculated every look that he threw toward her, and studied every attitude that he assumed and every movement that he made; so that not once, no, not even for a single instant, while they thus remained seated together in the parlour, did Pauline suspect that her agreeable and fascinating companion was otherwise than as represented.

Indeed, so well pleased were they with each other that three hours elapsed ere they fancied that even one had passed away since the first moment that they met.

It was now ten o'clock, and Pauline prepared supper, of which they partook together; and thus the time was again whiled rapidly away, until eleven. Then the young lady began to grow anxious for the return of her sister; but Florimel was perfectly certain that Octavia would not come home until the morning. He accordingly affected to be getting sleepy, in the hope of inducing Pauline to retire to rest without delay; and she proposed to conduct her new friend to the spare chamber, observing that she must sit up to await her sister's return. Florimel apologized for his drowsiness, and declared his intention of keeping her company in her vigil; and thus another hour passed.

Midnight struck — and still Octavia came not.

" You are uneasy respecting your sister? " said the disguised nobleman, in a soothing tone.

" She promised to return by eleven, at the latest," answered Pauline.

" Perhaps something of importance may detain her," suggested Florimel, anxious to elicit, if possible, the nature of the excuse which Octavia made for her absence.

" It may indeed be so," said Pauline, in a musing tone. " She went out shopping yesterday evening; and as she was passing along Oxford Street, she saw an elderly lady run over by a hackney-coach. My sister was the first to hasten to the assistance of the sufferer, who happened to live close by. Octavia accordingly aided her to reach her home; and the lady besought her to remain with her for a few hours. This request was granted; and it was past eleven when my sister returned home. This evening she thought it would be but courteous and humane to call and inquire after the patient; and as the old lady dwells entirely alone, Octavia foresaw that she would ask her to pass a little time with her. She, however, promised to come back by eleven at the latest; and now," added Pauline, glancing uneasily at the watch which Mrs. Smith had given her, " it is a quarter after twelve."

" My dearest Miss Clarendon," said Florimel, " there is nothing in your sister's prolonged absence to make you uneasy. I can readily understand the cause of it. The elderly lady is all alone, you tell me, and she is perhaps worse. Your sister, who is no doubt as kind-hearted as yourself, will not abandon the sufferer in such cruel circumstances; and she very naturally concludes that you will not fail to conjecture the reason of her absence."

" Oh, thank you for thus suggesting an explanation," cried Pauline, her countenance brightening up. " Yes, it must be as you suppose. At all events, I will not compel you to sit up any longer on my account."

" And as your sister is not here," said Florimel, with a palpitating heart, " there is no necessity for us to separate even though we retire to rest."

" If you do not object to take Octavia's place by my side," responded Pauline, with artless cheerfulness, " I shall be delighted to have you as a companion."

With these words, the ingenuous and unsuspecting maiden secured the front door and led the way to her bedchamber.

CHAPTER XIX

THE VIRGIN AND THE VOLUPTUARY

As Lord Florimel followed the beauteous Pauline up the stairs, that pang which had already smitten him again shot through his heart; for the reader will remember that we have described him as being by no means naturally deficient in generous sentiments, and now that his atrocious perfidy seemed to be approaching its consummation, those finer feelings that lay crushed and subdued beneath the influence of voluptuous passions and selfish desires suddenly put forth a latent power. But it was when he crossed the threshold of the virgin sanctuary and the door of the bedchamber was closed behind him, it was then that his remorse became invested with a horror such as he had never known nor experienced before.

Sinking upon a chair, he pressed his hand to his brow as if to steady the thoughts that were racking his brain; and Pauline, observing his emotion, though very far from suspecting the cause, smoothed down his hair with the unpremeditated manner of one who offers a tender sympathy, observing at the same time, " My poor friend, you feel unhappy at the idea of passing the night beneath a stranger's roof."

These words, falling upon the ears of the young nobleman in all the silver melody of Pauline's sweet voice, and the simultaneous contact of her warm hand which swept over his forehead, produced an effect upon him as if lightning had been suddenly poured into his veins; and, taking that hand, he pressed it to his lips in the rapture of a passion which the unsuspicious maiden believed to be a grateful friendship.

" No, my dearest Pauline," he said, — " for you will permit me to call you by your Christian name, as I must henceforth be Gabrielle to you, — I am not unhappy on account of this temporary absence from home. Indeed, I rejoice at the incident, disagreeable in itself though it were, which drove me to seek an asylum beneath this roof, inasmuch as it has made me acquainted with you. We have not known each other quite six hours, and I already feel that I love you as a sister."

"We will be friends, Gabrielle," responded the artless Pauline. "I have often longed to possess a sincere and dear friend, one of about my own age, and whom I could take a fancy to at first sight; for as my sister's ideas and thoughts so completely correspond with my own, we never have anything now to say to each other, no little confidences to impart, no advice mutually to seek — "

"I understand you, my dear Pauline," interrupted Florimel, enchanted at the turn which the conversation was taking; "and I can assure you that I have often felt just as you describe. Yes, I have longed to form a friendship with some young lady of about my own age — "

"How old are you, Gabrielle?" asked Miss Clarendon.

"Guess," returned Florimel, smiling in his sweetest manner.

Pauline surveyed the disguised nobleman attentively for nearly a minute, and then said, "I should conceive you to be about one and twenty."

"No, I am only nineteen," answered Florimel, determined to make his years correspond as closely as possible with those of his lovely companion.

"That is exactly my age!" exclaimed Pauline, with a delight so frank and real that it was almost childish. "Yes, yes," she continued, in the same joyous tone, "we will be friends, bosom friends, Gabrielle, will we not?"

"Till death!" replied the nobleman. "And now let us seal our friendship with a kiss."

Pauline bent down to him as he still remained seated on the chair; and as she pressed her moist lips to his, he could scarcely prevent himself from flinging his arms around her and straining her to his breast.

"Now let us think about retiring to rest," said Pauline; "and we will talk ourselves to sleep," she added, gaily.

With these words she proceeded to lay aside her gown;

and when Florimel beheld her lovely form set off in all its fine contours by the corset that rather took its shape from those charms than gave any symmetrical improvement to them, his passion was inflamed almost beyond the power of control. Burning desire struggling with a consciousness of the paramount necessity of prudence, an intense fervour raging in spite of the certainty that any abrupt declaration of his sex would ruin his project, an ardent longing to throw himself at her feet, proclaim his love, and implore her to have pity upon him, — such was the turmoil of emotions that now agitated within the breast of Lord Florimel.

Placing herself before the glass, and having her back turned toward him, Pauline began to arrange her hair for the night. Having unloosed the shining masses, which now flowed in silken waves over her naked shoulders, she combed out that luxuriant covering which might have been envied by the proudest empress that ever wore a diadem upon her brow.

" My sweet Pauline," said Florimel, impatient to give their conversation such a turn that he might gradually prepare the maiden's mind, as it were, for the *dénouement* of this adventure, " is it not strange that we should have experienced precisely the same views and the same thoughts relative to the necessity of a sincere and tender friendship in order to complete our happiness? "

" It proves that our dispositions are congenial, and that there exists a strong sympathy between us, Gabrielle," returned Pauline.

" And yet perhaps the ideas and reflections of one of us have been more developed by circumstances than those of the other," observed Florimel.

" I do not understand you, my sweet friend," said Pauline, who was still occupied in combing out her beautiful hair before the glass.

" I alluded to myself," continued the young nobleman, heaving a profound sigh.

" Ah! you appear to be unhappy! " exclaimed Pauline; " and now I remember that when we first came up-stairs something was annoying you. Have you anything preying upon your mind? If so, it were wrong to keep it a secret from me, after the vows of friendship which we have exchanged."

"FLORIMEL BEHELD HER LOVELY FORM"

Photogravure from original by Bird

J.E. BIRD
07

" You shall possess my entire confidence, dearest Pauline," said the disguised nobleman. " The first secret that I have to reveal to you is this — I love! "

" And are you unhappy on that account? " inquired the young maiden, in a tone of tender interest. " But perhaps you are not loved in return? "

" I know not," responded Florimel, throwing a deep melancholy into his voice. " I hope — and yet I fear."

" Doubtless the object of your affection is very handsome? " said Pauline.

" Not handsome — femininely beautiful — very beautiful! " exclaimed Florimel, with all the effusion of a worship. " But tell me, my dearest friend, have you yet known what it is to love? "

" Never," answered Pauline.

" Then are you unacquainted with a source of the purest and most ineffable delight," said the youthful voluptuary; " or I should rather describe it as a deliciousness of the feelings, a paradise of the emotions — "

" Wherefore, then, are you unhappy, Gabrielle? " inquired the artless girl.

" Oh, love is a pleasing pain, or a painful pleasure — I know not how to describe it! " exclaimed Florimel. " It is something that encourages the most heavenly hopes, throughout which there nevertheless runs an undercurrent of fears; and yet these fears are not exactly what you would describe as gloomy apprehensions. They are rather an exciting influence, seldom or never sinking into despondency. Thus, when I tell you that I am unhappy because I fear, I should likewise avow that I am happy because I hope; and such a strange, undefinable sentiment is love, that these contradictory feelings, these opposite sentiments, are experienced by the soul at one and the same time."

" 'Tis singular, most singular," observed Pauline, in a musing tone; " and yet I think that I can fully understand what love must be."

" Friendship often ripens into love," said Florimel.

" You can scarcely say often, my dear Gabrielle," returned Pauline; " because it is very seldom that friendship ever subsists between a young lady and a young gentleman who are not related to each other."

" Nevertheless, such is the case with regard to myself," observed Florimel. "A sincere friendship exists between me and the object of my love."

"And on your side that friendship has already ripened into love?" said Pauline, interrogatively.

"Yes," answered the disguised nobleman; "and if it be true that love begets love, I may yet see all my hopes fulfilled and my fears dissipated."

"Heaven send that you may, my dear Gabrielle!" exclaimed Pauline, in a tone of profound sincerity. "If I were a man I am certain that I could love you deeply and tenderly, and the more so when I learned that you already loved me."

"And what makes you hold this opinion, which is so flattering to me?" asked Florimel, trembling all over through very joy and pleasure.

"Because you are beautiful — extremely beautiful," said Pauline, turning around toward him, "and because you are so amiable, and good, and pleasing in your manners. Do you think, my dear Gabrielle, that I should have conceived so sudden a friendship for you if you were not all that I represent? Oh, I am sure that you will be happy in the affection that you have formed, for to know you is to love you."

"Dearest Pauline," murmured Florimel, in a tremulous tone, "I may repeat all your own words and apply them to yourself, for to know you is to love you also."

"We will love each other as very sincere friends," said the young maiden; and while she was thus giving utterance to words that were the outpourings of her artless and ingenuous soul, she was simultaneously laying aside further portions of her dress, until she stood in a state of seminudity in the presence of the disguised nobleman, who was a prey to such varied and conflicting emotions that he was riveted as it were to his seat.

"Yes, we will love each other as sincere friends," he said, his voice so full of profound feeling that the beauteous, unsuspecting Pauline was touched to the very soul by its soft and melodious tone; and throwing her arms around the traitor's neck, she imprinted a fervent kiss upon his forehead.

But how did Florimel restrain his feelings now? how exercise the least control over a passion that was excited almost to madness? For, by the young maiden's movement, his very countenance was brought in contact with her virgin bosom, and her naked arms encircled him.

" Oh, Pauline — Pauline," he exclaimed, " you know not how much I love you! "

" It affords me an indescribable pleasure to receive that assurance," said the charming girl, now withdrawing her arms from his neck, and again approaching the toilet-table.

" But can you conjecture wherefore I love you so ardently? can you divine wherefore I could fall down and worship you? " asked Florimel, in an impassioned tone. Then without waiting for a reply, he said, " It is not only because you are so beautiful and good, but it is also because you are the living counterpart of the object of my affections. Oh, if you and I love each other thus sincerely, would it not be a joyous event if some fairy could suddenly start up from the floor, and change one of us into a being of the opposite sex? "

" Oh, Gabrielle, what a strange idea! " exclaimed Pauline, turning around toward her companion, with a sudden feeling of uneasiness springing up in her soul.

" Nay, do not reproach me, my angelic friend," cried Florimel. " You will find that I am a romantic creature, fond of giving my imagination full play, and at times somewhat dreamy and visionary. But you will bear with me in that, Pauline, you will not chide your friend on this account! Suffer me to indulge in the delicious thoughts in the stream of which my soul was being gently borne along, and whose current leads amidst flowery scenes to the very portals of Elysium. I was conjuring up a beatific vision when you interrupted me. I was fancying that if all we have read of fairies and good genii could possibly be true, how delightful were it if one of that powerful race would suddenly appear before us, touch me with a magic wand, and say, 'Thou adorest Pauline — become a man — throw thyself at her feet — and claim her as thy wife! ' "

" Gabrielle, I implore you not to continue in this strain," cried Pauline, gazing strangely upon the flushed cheeks and flashing eyes of her companion. " You terrify me — I know not why; and yet a vague apprehension, a feeling of increasing uneasiness has come over — "

" Give not way to these idle fears, my beauteous friend," interrupted Florimel, whose looks were fixed upon the bosom of the virgin whom he sought to make his victim. " Do you think it possible that my vision can be realized? And even if it were, Pauline, should you be vexed? should you be annoyed? Ere now you told me that you had never yet experienced the passion of love; and I assured you, in reply, that earth's greatest happiness was, in that case, still unknown to you. But you have declared your friendship for me, and I have proved to you that friendship itself ripens into love. Now, suppose for a moment that the fairy could come forth, could touch me with a wand, could change my sex, and could endow me with a proud name and a colossal fortune, — suppose all this, my sweet Pauline, — and then imagine that you saw me at your feet, that I declared my fervent and unalterable love, that I implored you to become my wife, the partner of my rank and the sharer of my wealth, tell me, my dearest Pauline, what would your answer be? "

Gradually, as the young nobleman thus developed a theory which was in itself more or less a revelation, a suspicion, at first faint as the ringing of far-distant bells in the ear, rose up in the mind of Miss Clarendon; then, as the idea which had flashed to her brain received confirmation from the concluding words of the nobleman, her countenance became convulsed with terror, a faint shriek escaped her lips, she staggered a few paces toward the window, her impulse being to open it and cry for help, but her limbs failed her, and she sank almost insensible upon a chair.

Florimel sprang from his seat, threw himself on his knees before her, and endeavoured to take her hand. But, with the instinctive prompting of virgin modesty, Pauline crossed her arms over her bosom, and, bending a look full of mournful reproach upon the nobleman, she said, " You are not what you seem. Tell me who you are, and the purpose which has brought you hither? "

" Adorable Pauline," exclaimed Florimel, " the fairy has accomplished the task, and it is a devoted lover who kneels at your feet! "

The young maiden started from the chair. A profound sense of danger inspired her with sudden energy; and seizing a shawl, she hastily threw it over her shoulders, wrapping it across her bosom. Then, drawing herself up to the full height of her noble stature, while her countenance, losing its expression of alarm, assumed a sovereign dignity alike interesting and imposing, she said, " Whoever you may be, I command you to leave me this moment."

" Sooner than thus quit you, sooner than leave you mortally offended against me," cried Florimel, who had risen from his suppliant posture at the same moment that Pauline started from her seat, " I will commit suicide in your presence! My God, have pity upon me! I love, I adore you, Pauline, and your indignation, if unappeased, will reduce me to despair."

" It is impossible that this interview can be prolonged," said the young maiden, her tone becoming a trifle less severe and her countenance losing a small portion of its inflexibility. " I again command you to leave me, as the only condition on which you may ever hope to obtain my pardon for this black treachery and cowardly outrage."

" Your words are cutting — too cutting, Miss Clarendon," exclaimed the nobleman, with quivering lips. Then, in a sudden access of generous fervour, he hastily added, " But I deserve all that you can say to me — yes, I deserve it all! My conduct has indeed been treacherously black, and the outrage was cowardly. Yes, yes, you are right, beauteous maiden, and I am a villain! "

" Prove your contrition by leaving me instantaneously," ejaculated Pauline, whose gentle soul was secretly moved to pity the handsome, or, rather, beautiful youth whom she had already begun to love sincerely while believing that her new friend's attire was suited to the sex.

" My God! can nothing induce you to pardon me? " cried Florimel, whose agitation and excitement were very far from being feigned, inasmuch as the noble and dignified bearing of the young virgin had commanded his respect; and when such an impression is made upon a man of naturally generous feelings, remorse and compunction are certain to follow under such circumstances as those which we are detailing. " Pauline, adored Pauline," he exclaimed, clasping his hands, " hear me for a few moments! The fame of your beauty reached me, — never mind by what means, — and I was already in love with you before I saw you. I resolved to become acquainted with you; and my object has been thus far attained. I have outraged you, I have treated you in a manner which you have denounced in the terms properly applying to such behaviour; and now I beseech and implore you not to cherish a lasting indignation against me. On the contrary, dearest, dearest Pauline, on my knees do I pray you to accord a single syllable of hope to the wretched being who has thus merited your anger. Or, stay — one word more," exclaimed the young nobleman, suddenly drawing himself up as he was about to sink at the maiden's feet. "You know not who I am, but I solemnly and sacredly offer you my hand in honourable marriage, for you are the first woman that ever yet made upon my soul an impression which in its very symptoms is far different from a passing caprice or an evanescent passion. Say, then, my beloved Pauline, say, will you consent to become the partner of my rank and fortune? will you change your own sweet name of Clarendon for that of Lady Florimel?"

"Who are you?" inquired the maiden, bewildered and amazed. "Speak! and deceive me not!"

"I am Lord Florimel — but still Gabriel to you," answered the young nobleman.

At that moment a post-chaise drove up to the front of the house; and Pauline, hastily putting aside the window-curtain, looked forth into the road.

"Gracious heaven! 'tis my father!" she exclaimed, in accents of despair, as she turned once more toward Florimel. Then clasping her hands together in indescribable anguish, she murmured, "Octavia is not at home — and I —"

"Courage! reassure yourself!" hastily interrupted Florimel. "In the name of everything sacred, I implore you to be calm, and all shall be well."

"But how? — what can we do?" demanded Pauline, now suddenly struck with a sense of her complete dependence upon the young nobleman to save her honour from even the faintest suspicion on the part of her father. "What can we do, I ask?" she repeated; for at that moment a loud double knock at the door resounded through the house.

"Again I say, compose yourself," exclaimed the nobleman, speaking collectedly though with the haste occasioned by the urgency of the circumstances. "Listen to me attentively."

"I do — I do," interrupted Pauline, trembling all over like a timid dove.

"You have two aims to accomplish," continued Florimel: "the first is to screen yourself from suspicion, the second to save your sister from suspicion likewise."

"My God! what do you mean?" demanded the maiden, gazing in bewilderment upon her companion.

"I mean that your father will be angry if he should learn that your sister passes the night away from the house," returned Florimel, impressively. "This is what you must do: make him believe that Octavia is here, and prevent him from entering the chamber. Now go —"

At this instant the knocking was repeated; and Pauline, hastily enveloping herself in a cloak, hurried down-stairs to open the door.

CHAPTER XX

A NIGHT AT THE VILLA

Mr. Clarendon was about fifty-four years of age, tall in person, and of aristocratic appearance. His countenance was severe and even haughty in expression; and yet there was an indelible stamp of melancholy upon the lofty brow. His face was thin, his features were sharp and angular, and his complexion was sallow. His eyes were small, dark, and steadfast in their look: they were not piercing, and yet, when their gaze fell fully upon the countenance of an individual, they seemed capable of reading his very soul. His hair was of an iron-gray deepening into blackness, or rather retaining its pristine hue at the whiskers, which were thin but dark. His lips were small and usually compressed, as if he were accustomed to long intervals of profound thought; and care had traced its lines on either side of his mouth.

Somewhat spare in person, his figure was nevertheless well knit and genteel; and though it was slightly bowed, the cause was the same that had left the shade upon his forehead and had marked the wrinkles on his countenance. For his was one of those vigorous constitutions and iron frames which appear to defy the lapse of years, and which Time, as if resolved not to be defeated in its universal ravages, had therefore employed Sorrow to undermine.

We have already stated that he had done his duty as a good father toward his motherless daughters, and he loved them tenderly. It was true that misfortunes had somewhat soured his temper, and rendered him easy to be irritated; but he seldom spoke unnecessarily a sharp word to his children, or, if he did, he made amends by a deeper demonstration of affection afterward. Naturally taciturn and reserved, he was accustomed to pass hours together in the seclusion of his own chamber; and thus the young ladies were left much to themselves and thrown upon their own resources for recreation. In a word, they were what may be termed "their own mistresses;" and even in their walks Mr. Clarendon seldom accompanied them. He entertained the fullest confidence in their propriety of conduct, and their very artlessness and inexperience were in his estimation the best proofs that his reliance upon their prudence had not been misplaced.

Having recorded these few observations, we resume the thread of our narrative.

Pauline had taken the candle with her, and Florimel was accordingly left in the dark in the maiden's bedchamber.

She descended the stairs with precipitate haste, and opened the front door. In another moment she was clasped in the arms of her father, who exclaimed, "I have welcome news for you, dearest Pauline. But you did not expect me home so soon, perhaps, nor yet at such an unseasonable hour?"

"Oh, I am rejoiced that you have returned in safety, dear father," responded the affectionate daughter, for an instant forgetting in the delight of this meeting the embarrassing circumstances in which she was placed with regard to Florimel on the one hand and her sister on the other.

The postilion now brought Mr. Clarendon's trunk into the house; and that gentleman, having paid for the hire of the vehicle in which he had travelled, entered the front parlour with his daughter.

"You will take some refreshment, dear father?" she exclaimed, observing that he looked fatigued, although his countenance was happier in expression than she had ever before known it to be.

"Nothing, Pauline, thank you. I am only wearied in consequence of a tedious journey," he continued; "for the roads are execrable with the thaw that has set in, and hence the lateness of the hour at which I have arrived. But how is my dear Octavia?"

"She is well, quite well, dear father," answered the young maiden, feeling that her countenance became scarlet and then suddenly pale as she spoke; for it appeared to her as if she were already uttering a falsehood, or at all events deceiving her sire with an equivocation.

" She is asleep, no doubt, and I will not disturb her to-night," said Mr. Clarendon, who at the instant was divesting himself of his cloak and shawl-kerchief, and did not therefore perceive his daughter's emotions. " I was as much surprised as rejoiced when I saw a light in your bedchamber, for I thereby felt assured that you had not as yet retired to rest, and that consequently I should not have to awaken you. But I suppose that you have burned a candle all night in your own room during my absence? "

" And yet we are not very timid, you know, dear father," said Pauline, evasively; and again did she blush at the part which she was playing. " But you told me that you had welcome news? " she exclaimed, anxious to turn the conversation.

" Yes, Lord Marchmont has behaved well at last," replied Mr. Clarendon. " However, I will tell you everything in the morning — or, rather, a few hours hence, for 'tis already long past midnight. I am myself wearied, and I will not keep you longer out of your warm bed."

Thus speaking, Mr. Clarendon embraced his daughter, took the candle which she offered him, and proceeded upstairs to his bedchamber, which was in readiness for his reception.

Pauline obtained another light; and with trembling limbs and palpitating heart she returned to her own room, whence she had been absent about a quarter of an hour.

But during that interval a great change had taken place in the sentiments of Lord Florimel. He had relapsed from the chivalrous noble into the selfish voluptuary, and his imagination had become inflamed with ardent desires as he dwelt upon the charms of the young maiden — those virgin charms which, in her unsuspecting artlessness, she had revealed to his eyes. He smiled when he recollected that enthusiastic admiration of her innocence and virtue, into which a sudden ebullition of generous feeling had hurried him, even to the point of offering her his hand; and the more he mentally gloated upon the loveliness of Pauline, the less scrupulous did he become in his intentions with regard to her. At length, almost maddened with the fervent thoughts that thus superseded the nobler sentiments which he had for a few moments entertained, he vowed to possess her at all risks, and to sacrifice her honour to his passion in spite of all the obstacles which her virtue might throw in his way.

Such was the state of his mind when she reappeared; and, although she was enveloped in that ample cloak which she had thrown on ere she descended to open the front door for her father, his imagination nevertheless retained a vivid impression of the white neck, beauteous shoulders, and well-rounded bosom which a short time previously were fully unveiled to the unsuspected licentiousness of his gaze.

The maiden placed the candle upon the table, drew the folds of the cloak as completely around her erect form as possible, and seating herself in a chair close to that which Florimel occupied, bent upon him a look so full of earnest appeal that a remorseful pang once more shot through his heart.

" My lord," she said, in the lowest tone to which her dulcet voice was capable of falling without becoming actually inaudible, " you are beneath the roof of an honest man. Respect his daughter, who says that she is so entirely dependent upon your honour and your mercy."

Florimel contemplated her lovely countenance with eyes brimful of passion; but he knew not how to reply to the appealing words which she had addressed to him.

" Not half an hour has elapsed," continued Pauline, now casting down her looks, while a carnation glow suffused her cheeks, " since your lordship honoured me by a proposal which was well calculated to win my forgiveness for the perfidious conduct which preceded it. But to that offer your lordship will insist upon no reply at present. Perhaps, indeed, your lordship may wish to have leisure to reconsider it," she said, her voice becoming tremulous, " and therefore — "

" No, my adored Pauline," interrupted Florimel, who hoped by fostering her belief in his honourable intentions that he should more easily accomplish his evil aims, " I cannot desire to have time for reflection on that head. I love you — I adore you — "

" This is language which, under present circumstances, I dare not listen to," interrupted the girl, firmly and proudly. " Ere now your lordship evinced a generous spirit. Do not, oh, do not destroy the confidence wherewith you thus inspired me. For it was through this confidence that I yielded to the alternative of deceiving my father instead of looking him full in the face and revealing all the incidents of the last few hours. And, oh, I blush, I feel ashamed of the duplicity of which I was guilty when he asked for Octavia and I suffered him to believe that she was here! It was the first time that I ever deceived my father," she added, mournfully, "and it shall be the last."

"Remember, Pauline," observed Florimel, "that you have saved your sister from those suspicions which Mr. Clarendon would have inevitably entertained concerning her absence."

"But wherefore should he think ill of his own child?" demanded Pauline, impatiently, though still in a low, whispering tone, for her sire's bedchamber joined that wherein this colloquy took place. "Octavia would explain in the morning the cause of that absence — "

"No, my dearest girl," interrupted Florimel, suddenly resolving upon a new and most iniquitous expedient in order to obtain a victory over the maiden's honour: namely, by exciting her imagination with voluptuous images and conjuring up soft desires in her virgin mind, — "no, dearest girl, Octavia will not be able to give a satisfactory account of her long absence from home."

"Great heaven! what do you mean, my lord?" asked Pauline, for an instant yielding to the terror with which these ominous words inspired her; but almost immediately recovering her self-possession, she said, with a tone and manner of mingled indignation and pride, "Your lordship dares not asperse the honour of my sister."

"Is this a time, is this a place, or are these the circumstances, for us to veil our thoughts, or shut our eyes against palpable truths?" demanded Florimel. "I declare most solemnly, Pauline, that I would not wilfully wound your feelings; but I must speak to you as if I were your friend — or your brother — or your husband. Listen, then, and endeavour to exercise the strongest control over your emotions."

"Go on, go on," murmured the young maiden, frightened by the impressiveness of his manner and the confidence with which he was evidently touching upon a delicate subject.

"Your sister is in love!" he said, at the same time holding up his taper forefinger to enjoin the maiden to forbear from giving vent to the feeling of astonishment which this announcement was so well calculated to raise up in her bosom.

" In love? " she repeated, mechanically. " Impossible! "

" Sweet simpleton that thou art, my Pauline! " returned Lord Florimel, smiling. " Is it so very wonderful that Octavia should be in love? For are not you yourself already in love likewise — and with me? "

" My lord! my lord! this pleasantry is cruel! " began Pauline, her countenance expressing mingled impatience, anger, and curiosity.

" By heaven! I never was more serious in my life, sweet girl," answered Florimel. " However, to return to your sister, I tell you that she is in love, and that she has deceived you, with absurd excuses for her absence."

" Oh, if I thought that this could be true! " murmured Pauline, bursting into tears. " But no, no," she exclaimed, wiping away those crystal drops that were tracing their pearly path down her beauteous cheeks, " Octavia would not refuse me her confidence, much less deceive me."

" One word, Pauline," said Florimel, gazing upon her with a mixture of tenderness and archness which rendered his countenance beautifully soft and feminine in expression at that moment, so that even the maiden herself, much as her mind was preoccupied, felt her heart irresistibly attracted toward him, — " one word, Pauline," he repeated, " and now answer me truly. When Octavia returns home in the morning, shall you frankly and unreservedly reveal to her all the incidents that have occurred during her absence? "

A blush mounted rapidly up to the virgin's pure and spotless brow; and she cast down her looks at the same time. Then, after a long pause, she raised her eyes timidly, observing, in a tremulous voice, " I can understand now that it is possible for even the innocent and guileless heart to cherish secrets of a certain nature."

" You believe, then, at length, that it is quite probable for your sister to be in love, and yet not confess her passion to you? " said Lord Florimel. " Yes, Pauline, dearest, she is indeed in love; and her lover," he added, in a melting tone and with a plaintive look, " sighs not vainly at her feet as I have been doomed this night to humble myself at yours."

" I dare not give way to the suspicion which your words have conjured up," murmured Pauline, covering her face with her hands as if to shut out some unpleasant object from her view.

" You are passing from a state of complete innocence, with regard to the world, into the novitiate of experience," said Florimel; " and you will be happier, Pauline, oh, far happier, when there is nothing left for you to learn. Already has Octavia passed the boundary which separated her from the true enjoyments of this life, and in the arms of him whom she adores she tastes the ineffable bliss and the Elysian delights of love."

" No more — no more! " exclaimed Pauline, a strange tremor agitating her entire frame.

" Hush! " whispered Florimel, " remember that your father is in the next room."

" My father! " repeated Pauline, with a shudder. " What will he say, what will be his feelings, when my lost and unhappy sister returns home in the morning, if indeed she should ever come back again? "

" Fear not, she will return," said Florimel.

" Then your lordship knows more than you have already told me? " exclaimed the maiden, her excitement every instant increasing. " You are aware of much — oh, far too much — concerning my sister? Perhaps you were even assured beforehand that she would not come back to-night? " added Pauline, now calling to mind the readiness with which he had invented excuses in order to tranquillize her fears relative to the prolonged absence of Octavia.

" I will not attempt to conceal from you, my angel — " began Florimel.

" Again I command you, my lord, to refrain from language which it ill becomes me to hear," interrupted Pauline, recovering her maiden dignity once more.

" Then you do not love me! " said the nobleman, assuming a plaintive tone.

" Oh, I could love you, I could serve you on my bended knees, I could become your slave," returned Pauline, relapsing suddenly into a state of painful excitement, as different emotions swayed her soul, even as an Æolian harp oscillates to every variety of the breeze; " yes, and I should look upon you as a guardian angel," she added, with a feverish gleaming in those eyes usually so soft and melting, " if you were to save my sister from incurring our father's suspicions — our father's wrath."

" What would you have me do? " asked Florimel, his breast a prey to desires which were almost maddening, as he contemplated the lovely girl; for in the agitation that had latterly seized upon her, and when she covered her face with her hands, as she now recovered, she had thrust her naked arms forth from beneath the ample cloak, and the licentious voluptuary was enabled to feast his eyes upon those arms so white and round.

" What would I have you do? " she repeated, suddenly noticing the disordered condition of her *déshabillé,* and once more gathering the folds of the mantle around her lovely form. " I would have you — if your lordship really loves me — save my sister's fault from being discovered by her father. You know where she is at this moment — I am sure that you are not ignorant on this head. No, everything you have said regarding her convinces me that I err not in this belief. 'Tis for you, then, Lord Florimel — "

" Call me Gabriel," interjected the nobleman, now fancying that the maiden was rapidly falling into his power.

" Yes, I will call you Gabriel — my dear friend Gabriel," repeated Pauline, emphatically; for she was ready to do almost anything in order to screen her sister; " and I will never, never forget your kindness, if you will serve me in this instance. It is for you, I say, to quit this house as speedily and as cautiously as possible, to repair to the place where you know my sister to be, to insist upon obtaining an interview with her to tell her that our father has returned suddenly, and almost unexpectedly, and to compel her to hasten home ere he shall have descended from his chamber in the morning. And you must also assure her that I, on my part, will leave nothing unattempted or undone in order to cover her secret with an impenetrable veil. Now, my dear Gabriel, will you do all this for me — "

" And my reward, Pauline? — what shall be my reward? " exclaimed the nobleman, extending his arms toward her.

But a sudden change came over the young maiden. All her agitation, all her excitement abandoned her in a moment, — sinking down into a cold astonishment, if we may be allowed the expression; or, in other and more explicit terms, the generous fervour of her reliance and the ingenuous warmth of her confidence in respect to Lord Florimel received such an instantaneous shock that she gazed upon him with the freezing hauteur of disdain and contempt, and also with the steadfastness of surprise at that abrupt and unexpected manifestation of his intense selfishness.

" You do not love me, my lord," she at length observed, in a tone indicative of profound disappointment; " nor do you even entertain the slightest particle of friendship toward me."

" Unkind Pauline! wherefore thus plant a dagger in my heart? " demanded Florimel.

" I have been deceived in you — cruelly deceived," resumed the maiden, drawing back her chair a few paces, and waving her hand imperiously to forbid the nobleman from daring to approach her. Then, again wrapping her mantle closely around her, she said, " I had already forgotten the treachery with which our interview this night commenced on your side, because the discovery of that perfidious conduct was succeeded by an interval of apparent generosity on your part. Yes, I was willing to pardon the behaviour which, at one time in the course of these long hours that we have passed together, I stigmatized as black and cowardly; I was willing to forget it, on account of the contrition that your lordship seemed to manifest. And, oh, I now indeed perceive," she added, bitterly, " that I am passing from a state of complete innocence, with regard to the world, into the novitiate of experience, — and the first fruits of this new study are sour enough, I can assure you! I thought to trust you as a friend, to confide in you as — as — "

And here her voice became suddenly choked with emotions.

" As a lover — as a husband! " Lord Florimel hastened to add. " Oh, do not lose all confidence in me, my adored one," he continued, speaking from the depths of a heart which remorse had again touched; for there was something in the dignified reproaches of Pauline that overawed the youthful libertine and compelled him to gaze upon his own selfishness in all its most ghastly and repulsive shades.

" Let me be candid with you, Lord Florimel," said Pauline, who had herself undergone such a variety of feelings and emotions during the last few hours that she received therefrom many rapidly acquired teachings in the school of experience, and from the same source had drawn an inspiration enabling her to read the more profoundly into the true character and disposition of her noble companion, — " let me be candid with you, Lord Florimel," she said. " A veil has fallen from my eyes, a light has dawned in upon my soul, and I already see many things differently from the view I had been accustomed to take of them. I can even understand how love may lead to error, and I pity rather than blame my unfortunate sister. Oh, yes, I feel how weak is woman, and how strong are the temptations which she has to resist. Nay, I have this night experienced those sensations which prove to me beyond all doubt that I likewise am weak, and that there have been moments during our interview when I was standing upon the verge of a precipice. But the sense of that very weakness, Lord Florimel, shall henceforth constitute my strength. A full and perfect comprehension of the dangers which beset my path shall supply a rigid and unvarying prudence for any lack of strictly virtuous principles within me. Learn, then, that if your lordship should renew those honourable proposals which you ere now made, I feel that I can love you — ay, and devotedly; but if your lordship should dare to utter a word or make a gesture calculated to insult me, I will that moment seek refuge with my father, throw myself at his feet, confess all that has occurred, and leave him to punish you."

It is scarcely possible to convey an adequate idea of the effect produced on the young nobleman by this long, impressive, and dignified address. Here was a lovely virgin, of tender age, proclaiming her own weakness, acknowledging her own deficiency in that deeply rooted principle of female virtue which a mother's delicate teachings and familiar inculcations can alone implant in the bosom of girlhood, and yet boldly assuring her lover, into whose treacherous designs she had fully penetrated, that the very sense of her own liability to fall should be converted by her strength of mind into a fortalice of defence!

Again was his soul stricken with remorse, again did a feeling of fervent admiration spring up within him, and again did a chivalrous enthusiasm take possession of him in respect to that bright and beauteous being whose conduct was so well calculated to win the approval of a generous heart.

"Pauline — my beloved Pauline," he murmured, in a contrite tone, "you have worked a great and signal change within me. On my knees, yes, on my knees, do I implore your pardon for all that has been bad and wicked in my behaviour toward you this night."

And Gabriel sank into a suppliant posture before her as he thus spoke.

The amiable but strong-minded girl extended her hand, which he took in both his own and pressed respectfully to his lips; and she did not attempt to withdraw it. For that same experience — or rather intuitive knowledge — which had so suddenly made her sensible of the excellence of female virtue and the dangers that surrounded it, also prevented her from falling into the extreme of a ridiculous prudery.

"Do not kneel to me, my lord," she said, in a kind and encouraging tone. "Remember, I am but a humble girl, and you are a great nobleman."

"And my pride shall be to make a great lady of you, adorable Pauline," responded Florimel, as he rose from his suppliant posture and resumed his chair. "And now tell me what you wish me to do, or, rather, give me your instructions, and I will obey them."

"Oh, how well could I think of your sex were you always to adopt this demeanour toward me," exclaimed Pauline. "Now do I recognize in you everything generous and noble and good which properly belongs to man."

"If I be thus changed, Pauline," said Florimel, in a tone of sincerity, "it is your bright example that has worked so salutary an effect."

"Dear Gabriel, you know not how it delights me to hear you speak in language characterized by truthfulness and candour. You are far, oh, far handsomer, now that your features are expressive of frankness and sincerity, than when your words were fraught with guile and deceit."

"You feel, then, that you can love me, sweet Pauline?" asked the nobleman, a pure and holy delight imparting ecstatic sensations to his soul.

" As unreservedly as I declare that I shall hate you if your present behaviour change toward me, do I confess that I can love you with all my heart — even to the laying down of my life for your sake — if your real character should prove to be as I now read it."

This response commenced with a dignity that bore the most unequivocal testimony to the strength of the maiden's virtuous resolves, and concluded with a tenderness which showed that her gentle heart was indeed susceptible of a pure and honourable love.

" Never again, dearest Pauline," observed Florimel, " shall you have cause to reproach me. And now issue your commands, that I may show my zeal and readiness in obeying them."

" You will undertake to do all I have asked in reference to my sister — my poor, lost, fallen Octavia? " said the maiden, her voice becoming tremulous with emotion.

" I swear to accomplish your wishes," replied Florimel.

" It is now nearly two o'clock in the morning," continued Pauline, after referring to her watch. " Doubtless my father is asleep — he was much wearied when he retired to rest an hour ago — and you can descend the stairs so cautiously that he will not be disturbed. At all events, the trial must be made, the risk must be incurred."

Then, without any affectation of prudery, but with a charming readiness which implied the full extent of the confidence that the maiden now placed not only in her own virtue but likewise in the altered sentiments of her lover, Pauline hastened to put the gipsy hat on Florimel's head and tie the ribbons beneath his chin. She then assisted him to resume his ample shawl, which she herself fastened for him over his chest; and when these arrangements were completed, she observed, with an arch smile, " The next time that I have the pleasure of seeing you, my dear Gabriel, you will have the kindness to appear in the costume befitting your sex."

" You will permit me to call again soon — very soon? " said Florimel, interrogatively.

" With pleasure," was the candid reply. " But upon what pretence can you visit the house? And remember that when you do come, we must appear before my father as if we had not been previously acquainted."

"He is a relative of Lord Marchmont, I believe?" observed Florimel, after a few moments' reflection. "That nobleman is a friend of mine, and I can procure an introduction from him to Mr. Clarendon. But what explanation am I to give to your sister?"

"Precisely the same that I shall offer," responded Pauline. "I shall tell her that you came hither in disguise, and with a treacherous intention toward myself; that I detected your perfidy, and remonstrated with you upon your conduct, appealing to your generosity and your honour to depart forthwith, and that you expressed so much sincere contrition as to obtain my pardon. You then informed me that accident had made you acquainted with my sister's indiscretion, and that I implored you to rescue her from the perils into which she had fallen. But you need not say that you passed two hours with me in this chamber," added Pauline, with a dignified frankness of tone and manner, although a blush suffused her cheeks at the same time; "because, inasmuch as Octavia herself has yielded to temptation, it were perhaps difficult for me to escape a suspicion on her part."

"And yet, if I inform her that her father has returned home, and that his arrival took place in the middle of the night, — or, rather, at an early hour in the morning," said Florimel, "she will wonder where I could have been concealed all that time."

"True!" exclaimed Pauline, now much embarrassed. "And yet it is absolutely necessary that she should be prepared beforehand to meet our father," she added, in a musing tone. "Oh, it is repugnant to my feelings to deal in duplicity and deceit; nevertheless, I could not endure the idea of being suspected even by my own sister —"

"Permit me to suggest an expedient," interrupted Florimel, who saw that the whole and sole difficulty to be cleared away was the fact that he had been introduced into the maiden's bedchamber. "I will tell your sister that my interview with you took place in one parlour, and that when your father arrived you conducted him into another."

"Gabriel, I thank you for this delicacy, this generosity on your part," exclaimed Pauline, taking his hand and pressing it tenderly for an instant. "We have now no more to say to each other, unless it be that on my side I must enjoin you to adopt such measures as to ensure the return of Octavia before eight o'clock this morning — or all will be lost."

"You may rely upon me, my beloved Pauline," answered Florimel.

The maiden then cautiously opened the door, and the two descended the stairs together as noiselessly as possible.

When they gained the passage below, they paused and listened. All was silent; and, reassured by the certainty that her father slept, Pauline opened the street-door.

"Farewell, sweetest, loveliest girl," said Florimel, in the lowest possible whisper.

"Farewell," murmured the maiden, in an equally subdued tone.

Their lips met for a moment, the soft sound of a billing kiss broke upon the solemn silence of the night, and in another instant the front door was closed noiselessly behind the disguised nobleman.

Pauline succeeded in regaining her chamber without disturbing Mr. Clarendon; and she retired to rest for a few hours. But the sleep that fell upon her eyes was uneasy and restless, for even in her dreams was she haunted by fears lest her sister's absence throughout the entire night should be discovered by her father.

And in those dreams did not the image of the handsome Gabriel appear to the maiden?

We believe so.

CHAPTER XXI

CAROLINE WALTERS

It will be remembered that Lord Florimel had by some means or other acquired the certainty that Octavia Clarendon would not return home until the morning. The fact was that when Mrs. Brace was occupied in dressing the young nobleman in the female attire suited to the evening's adventure, she had said to him, " You have now the whole night before you, Florimel; for Octavia's lover ere now intimated to me his desire that she should sleep here with him, and as her timidity may perhaps engender some scruples on this score, measures will be taken to enforce her compliance with her gallant's wishes. It is fortunate that the gentleman should have been seized with this caprice, inasmuch as it ensures your lordship an uninterrupted *téte-à-téte* with the lovely Pauline."

It was this speech on the part of Mrs. Brace that gave the nobleman the certainty above referred to.

As soon as he had quitted Pall Mall in his feminine disguise, the milliner rang the bell; and her lady's-maid — a handsome young woman of about twenty — answered the summons.

" Harriet," said Mrs. Brace, waiting ere she spoke until the dependent had closed the door, " I have some very particular instructions to give you. In the first place, Mr. Harley intends to remain here all night with Miss Clarendon; and he has commanded supper to be served up at ten o'clock precisely. You will, of course, order the cook to provide the choicest delicacies; and you will wait at table yourself, receiving the dishes on the landing outside from the footman. Do you understand? "

" Perfectly, madam," was the respectful answer.

" Now take this key," continued Mrs. Brace, handing to the lady's-maid the object alluded to. " It belongs to the sideboard in the room where Mr. Harley and Miss Clarendon now are; and at supper-time you will place upon the table, close to his right hand, the decanter of wine which you will find in that sideboard. You comprehend? "

" Certainly, madam," again responded the lady's-maid. " Have you any further commands? "

" None. Oh, stay — I remember! " exclaimed Mrs. Brace, suddenly recollecting a little commission which had been entrusted to her, and taking a letter from behind the ornaments on the mantel, she said, " Mr. Harley wrote this just now and ordered that it should be sent to Mr. Meagles's lodgings in the course of the evening. You will direct the footman to take it forthwith up to Jermyn Street."

" Yes, madam," and the abigail was about to withdraw, when Mrs. Brace again stopped her.

" You may tell Miss Walters that I am now ready to depart with her," she said, glancing at the timepiece and observing that it was a quarter past six o'clock; " and she can bring me down my bonnet and cloak. You will likewise order a coach to be sent for."

" To the shop-door, madam? " inquired Harriet.

" Certainly! " ejaculated Mrs. Brace. " Am I in the habit of going out by the door in St. James's Square? " she asked, somewhat petulantly.

" I beg your pardon, madam; but I was not aware for whom the hackney-coach was intended."

Having thus respectfully apologized, the abigail quitted the room.

A few minutes afterward a very pretty girl of about sixteen made her appearance. She was a brunette, with fine eyes, beautiful teeth, and rich red lips; and her black hair was as remarkable for its luxuriance as for its silken fineness. Though short in stature, she was perfectly symmetrical in shape; and from beneath her long cloak peeped forth as delicate a foot and ankle as the most particular connoisseur could wish to behold. But, alas! there was a cloud upon the beautiful face of this young creature; and it was not the shade of the neat gipsy hat that was set so tastefully upon her well-formed head, but it was the sombre gloom of a deep melancholy.

Caroline Walters — for that was her name — carried in her hands a bonnet and cloak, which she assisted Mrs. Brace to put on; and, when the milliner was thus attired for going out, Harriet entered the room to announce that the hackney-coach was at the door.

" You have got everything that you want, my dear Caroline? " said Mrs. Brace, speaking to Miss Walters in a tone of remarkable kindness, and even affection.

" Everything, madam, thank you," responded the young creature; and she turned hastily aside to conceal the tears that were tracing each other down her cheeks; for though the establishment of Mrs. Brace could scarcely be called a home, yet it was the only home that this poor girl had known for two years past, and her heart was swelling ready to break at the idea of quitting it, and under such circumstances, too.

" Come, Caroline, dry those tears," said Mrs. Brace, patting her upon the back in an endearing manner. " You will receive every attention and enjoy every comfort where you are going, and I shall pay you a visit as frequently as the numerous calls upon my time will permit. Besides, I shall allow you plenty of pocket-money, Caroline — "

" Oh, my dear madam," exclaimed the young girl, now bursting into a violent fit of weeping, " there are certain things which no money can purchase."

" Money can procure every source of happiness in this world, Caroline," said Mrs. Brace, soothingly; " and you are wrong thus to give way to your grief."

" Alas! money cannot purchase peace of mind nor restore lost innocence, madam," returned Miss Walters, in a voice almost suffocated with profound sobs; " neither can money procure oblivion for the past."

" This is childish, Caroline," observed Mrs. Brace, but not speaking impatiently. " Remember that I will always be a good friend to you — "

" Forgive me, dear madam, for thus yielding to my grief," said the orphan, for such indeed she was. " I know that you are my only friend. See, madam," she continued, hastily wiping her eyes, and turning toward the milliner a countenance to which she endeavoured to coax up smiles, "I am calm now, I am indeed, and I will not cry any more."

"There's a good girl," exclaimed Mrs. Brace. "All the tears in the world will not mend matters, and you will find Mrs. Lindley a very generous-hearted and amiable woman. Come, let me see a brighter smile still upon your sweet face, and we will then depart."

"I feel quite happy now, dear madam; you have completely reassured me," said Caroline; but a profound sigh convulsed her bosom at the same time that she uttered those words in which she herself so vainly endeavoured to believe.

Mrs. Brace now made the young creature swallow a glass of wine, which imparted an immediate glow to her features and made her seem happy, though her heart was still agitated as the ocean after a storm.

They then quitted the room together; and as they passed through the shop the young ladies engaged in that part of the establishment crowded around their companion to say farewell. Again the tears started into Caroline's eyes; but her friends, who were well acquainted with the reason which necessitated her temporary absence, appeared quite astonished that she should be otherwise than delighted at the prospect of a life of ease, indolence, and comfort for a few months. Poor Miss Walters did not, however, survey the matter in the same light as those other young ladies who had already passed through the same experiences on which this orphan girl was now about to enter.

At last Mrs. Brace and Caroline were seated in the hackney-coach, which immediately departed in the direction of Westminster Bridge, according to the instructions which the former hastily whispered to the driver.

Throwing herself back in the vehicle, Mrs. Brace drew her cloak around her, for the evening was very cold. Poor Caroline's teeth chattered, although the windows were both drawn up; but in her case the state of her feelings was of that nature which aggravated the chill without by means of the chill within, and it was the chill that lay at the heart's core which was more icy than that of the wintry temperature.

For, oh, bitter is the pang when all the streams of youth's fond hopes are frozen at their source, when the fountains of the young heart's first affections are suddenly congealed at the moment that they seem to be gushing forth in their most cheerful brightness, and when the flood of fervid feeling that was wont to bear flowers upon its moving bosom becomes suddenly ice-bound and has naught but withered leaves sweeping with ominous rustle over its surface!

Poor Caroline! thus was it with her; and yet she had only just entered her seventeenth year!

The coach had proceeded for some distance without a word being exchanged on the part of its inmates, when suddenly a deep sob, which the young girl could not stifle, — hard though she tried to do so, — caught the ear of Mrs. Brace.

"Do not be unhappy, dear Caroline," said the lady. "Again I assure you that you will be well cared for at Mrs. Lindley's, and I shall always be your friend. But is it possible that you love — "

"Oh, do not mention his name, madam!" cried the girl, suddenly becoming powerfully excited. "It would drive me mad! I know not whether I love him, or hate him, whether I could kill him, or throw my arms about his neck and cover him with kisses. My God! I cannot comprehend the state of my own feelings with regard to him."

"You should study to forget him, Caroline," said Mrs. Brace, assuming a solemn and impressive manner.

"That were impossible!" exclaimed Miss Walters, with a vehemence not only strange in so young a creature, inasmuch as it denoted a naturally fiery temperament, but also contrasting singularly with the subdued, docile, and retiring manner which had characterized her a short time before.

"Impossible!" repeated Mrs. Brace, in a tone of unfeigned surprise. "And wherefore, my love?"

"Because I must cherish his image either to make it an object of worship or an incitement to revenge," answered Caroline, her voice suddenly becoming gloomy and sullenly determined.

"You astonish, you alarm me!" cried Mrs. Brace. "I never heard you talk in so wild a strain before. For heaven's sake, compose yourself, Caroline, and give not way to such eccentric thoughts."

"Pardon me, my dear madam, if I have said aught to offend you," murmured the young girl; and a revulsion of the heart's emotions rapidly taking place, she burst into a flood of weeping.

Mrs. Brace did not now attempt to console her. She knew that, after the excitement which the poor creature had so recently experienced, the most certain relief was to be found in a free and copious outpouring of tears.

Meantime the coach had passed over Westminster Bridge; and, in a short time, turning to the right, it entered the maze of streets contiguous to Lambeth Palace.

In this neighbourhood is situate Fore Street, the houses on one side of which overlook that section of the river which lies between the archiepiscopal dwelling and Vauxhall Bridge. At the present day these houses consist chiefly of commercial or trading establishments; but in the times whereof we are writing, there were several private dwellings in that quarter.

These buildings stood — as indeed many of the structures still stand — upon the very verge of the river's bank; so that anything thrown out of the back windows would fall into the water at high tide. The fronts of the houses looked upon Fore Street, which was a narrow, gloomy, and lonesome thoroughfare, not altogether enjoying the best of reputations, although no specific charge was openly made against it. But it was one of those streets where paving and lighting rates were not collected in those days, as neither one of the two purposes for which such levies are usually made was applied to this particular locality.

The five or six private dwellings to which allusion has been made stood altogether in a row, unbroken by a single shop-front. They were old houses, with massive gables, small windows, and doors sunk three or four feet below the level of the footway, so that they were reached by a descent of steps.

All these tenements were sombre in appearance, and gave passers-by impressions irresistibly gloomy, — such as that they were inhabited by misers or misanthropes, or that some one lay dead within, awaiting the day for the funeral.

But the central house was more melancholy, more cheerless, and more sinister in its aspect than all the rest. The brick walls appeared more dingy, the heavy gables more frowning, the door more prison-like at the bottom of the steps. It was also in some points different from the others, as if the owner or the inhabitant had positively studied to enhance the gloom which characterized it, and render its aspect more ominous and foreboding than that of its companions. For large wooden shades projected over the windows in such a way that no one looking out of those casements could possibly catch a glimpse of the sky, but must perforce cast the eyes downward, the effect being the same as that experienced by one wearing a green shade. The real object of these overhanging contrivances was doubtless to prevent the inhabitants of the opposite houses from being able to notice what was going on in the front rooms of this particular dwelling; but in order to obtain this security against the prying eyes of the curious, the building had been invested with the gloom of a monastic establishment or a nunnery.

But as if those uncouth shades, which were painted a dull leaden colour, were not sufficient to keep out every gleam of cheerfulness that might by any accident happen to light upon this sombre abode, the inmates almost invariably had their blinds pulled down, and not unfrequently the curtains down. Nay, often the shutters, which were on the plan that enables them to be folded at will into the sides of the window-frames themselves, were kept closed all day in some of the rooms — ay, and for days and days together; so that, under all these circumstances, the dark pall of funereal gloom was never lifted from off that house.

And it was here that the hackney-coach stopped; it was here that Mrs. Brace and her young companion alighted.

But when, even through the deep obscurity which prevailed at that hour and particularly in that street, the eyes of Caroline Walters were enabled to embrace some portion of this soul-chilling gloominess of appearance which we have attempted to describe, an awful sensation came over her — a cold, slow, and horrified shuddering, as if a clammy snake were gradually — gradually — gradually winding itself around her person, underneath her clothing.

A dizziness followed, and for a few moments everything appeared to be in a whirl; then she felt as if she must shriek out and fall headlong into some unknown but terrible and fathomless abyss, when she was suddenly recalled to her senses by the opening of the door, and the appearance of an elderly woman, bearing a light, on the threshold at the bottom of the descent of steps.

"Come, my dear girl," said Mrs. Brace, taking Caroline's hand, "let me introduce you to my friend Mrs. Lindley, who is here to receive you."

The young girl threw a shuddering glance upon the woman, who was endeavouring to wreathe her countenance into a bland smile of welcome; but as the light, which she shaded with her long thin hand, was thrown full upon her features, it gave them a ghastly appearance, for Mrs. Lindley's face was long, angular, and sallow.

"Come, I say, Caroline — dear Caroline!" whispered Mrs. Brace, almost in an imploring tone, as she felt the young girl's hand snatched back abruptly from her own.

Those words succeeded in somewhat reassuring the affrighted creature, for they were spoken in a tone of penetrating kindness; and she accordingly followed the milliner down the steps into the house.

Mrs. Lindley then shut the door, and conducted her visitors from the long, low, dark passage, to the end of which Caroline's straining eyes could not penetrate, into a small parlour opening therefrom.

The shutters were closed inside the casements; the blinds were down, and the dark stuff curtains were drawn, as if the object were hermetically to seal up those windows, so that not a crevice should afford any passer-by an opportunity of peering into the room. The furniture was of walnut-wood, and looked like ebony in funereal dye; a few old and villainously executed steel-engravings, professing to be portraits of eminent physicians, and set in common black frames, were suspended to the wainscoting; and in an antique bookcase a few mouldy volumes on subjects of midwifery and the uses of herbs kept company with a huge Bible fastened by means of silver clasps.

There was a good fire in the grate, but the lambent flames that rose from a pile of crackling coal failed to mitigate the gloomy appearance of this room; and even the large black cat, which lazily opened its sparkling, glasslike green eyes, as it lay rolled up on the hearth-rug, had something ominous and foreboding about it in the estimation of the trembling, shuddering Caroline Walters.

Mrs. Lindley politely drew forward seats for the accommodation of her visitors; and then, slowly sinking down upon an easy chair with a very high back rudely carved, she put on a great pair of horn spectacles for the purpose of taking a good long survey of Caroline.

The young creature felt a disagreeable chill come over her, as the woman's small, dark, reptile-like eyes gleamed upon her through the large circular glasses; for it seemed as if a snake were endeavouring to fascinate her with its hideous gaze. And so far fascinated she indeed was, that she could not withdraw her looks from the countenance of Mrs. Lindley; they were riveted upon that cadaverous face with its sharp features and its parchment skin, its thin pale lips and its thick and prominent eyebrows.

" She is a sweet pretty girl, my dear madam," observed the woman, suddenly turning toward the milliner, and speaking in that mysterious and subdued tone which the very nature of her profession had rendered habitual, and which she therefore used on all occasions, even when commonplace subjects might have enabled her to dispense with so much caution.

" And Carry is not only a pretty girl, but a very good girl," said Mrs. Brace, in answer to Mrs. Lindley's remark. " I have assured her that she will experience nothing but the most affectionate kindness from your hands — "

" Hush! my dear madam — hush! " interrupted the woman, placing her finger upon her lip. " Not so loud, if you please! Remember that walls have ears — "

" I beg your pardon, Mrs. Lindley, I quite forgot," returned the lady to whom this remonstrance was addressed. Then continuing to speak in a more subdued tone, she said, " You will find Caroline docile, amiable, and obliging, and therefore I am certain that you will agree perfectly well together."

" I have no doubt of it," said Mrs. Lindley. " Some of Miss Walters's companions at your establishment, my dear madam, have most likely already informed her how I am accustomed to behave to my lodgers," continued the woman, taking off her horn spectacles and smiling with mysterious significancy. " Let me see: the last that I had here from your house, Mrs. Brace, was Emily Burdett — a dear, good, lively girl! She was always humming tunes from morning to night, and so I gave her the best room at the back of the house, that she might sing to the river and not to the street. Yes, a nice girl was Miss Burdett. The one before her was Rachel Forrester, I think, — a fine young woman, tall and stately as Juno, and passionately fond of reading romances. Pray, are those young ladies with you now, my dear madam? "

" Oh, yes," replied Mrs. Brace; " and I rather think — "

" Hush! — what? " murmured Mrs. Lindley, leaning forward with an air of great mystery to catch the revelation about to be made, and the nature of which she could pretty well conjecture. " Don't speak too loud, mind! What were you going to say? You think — "

" That Rachel Forrester will have to pay you another visit in a couple of months, or so," added Mrs. Brace, irresistibly and also unconsciously catching for the moment a portion of that extreme habit of caution which appeared to keep Mrs. Lindley ever on the *qui vive* lest her words should be overheard by curious ears or her movements noticed by prying eyes.

" Well — well," said the woman, " these things will happen — and it makes a good trade for me," she added, with a low, chuckling laugh, which was, however, the loudest that she ever indulged in. " Won't you take off your bonnet and cloak, and stay to supper with us? " she inquired after a short pause, and still addressing herself to the milliner.

" No, I thank you; I must return home almost immediately," replied Mrs. Brace. " But you had better take off your things, my love," she added, turning toward Caroline.

The young girl rose from her chair and mechanically complied with the suggestion of her mistress. She unfastened the strings of her gipsy hat, which she placed upon the table; and then slowly let her cloak fall from her shoulders. The casual observer, on glancing at the figure of Caroline Walters, would not have suspected its robust proportions to proceed from any other cause than the vigorous health of girlhood; but the experienced eye would have instantly perceived that she was far advanced in the way to become a mother, and that unnatural means of compression had been adopted to conceal her shame up to the present moment.

She blushed deeply as she removed her cloak; for she observed that Mrs. Lindley had at the same instant put on her spectacles again, and was once more surveying her with earnest attention.

"Sit down, my sweet child," said Mrs. Brace. "Remember that this is to be your home for the next two or three months — "

"Hush!" murmured Mrs. Lindley, taking off her glasses, and raising her forefinger significantly; "not so loud!" Then addressing herself to Caroline, she said, "Your excellent mistress desires you to consider this house your home, until you are in a condition to leave it again; and I cordially reiterate the assurance. Cheer up, therefore, Miss Walters, and let me observe a smile upon your pretty face."

"Yes, pray smile, Carry," exclaimed Mrs. Brace. "You will soon be reconciled to your new abode, and next Sunday evening I will come and pass an hour or two with you."

"You are very, very kind," murmured the young girl, with difficulty subduing a violent outburst of grief; for, in spite of all the soothing words that fell upon her ears, she had never felt more completely friendless, lonely, and desolate in her life.

"Have you many inmates at present?" inquired Mrs. Brace of the woman to whose care the unhappy Miss Walters was thus consigned.

"Four or five," was the answer. "The place is never altogether empty, you know," she added, with that subdued chuckling laugh which Caroline shuddered to hear.

"And of course Miss Walters will find companions in them?" said Mrs. Brace, interrogatively.

"In all save one," responded Mrs. Lindley, now sinking her tone to the lowest whisper. "But, hush! — what noise was that? I thought I heard the shutters creak — "

"No, it was only the hackney-coach moving a little outside," observed Mrs. Brace. "You were saying that there is one lady at present in your house — "

"Hush! not so loud! — walls have ears!" interposed the woman, nervously. "But the fact is that I have beneath my roof a young lady in reference to whom the utmost precaution and secrecy are requisite, — a young lady of high birth — hush! what noise was that? — the hackney-coach again — and she never quits her own room. Ah!

'tis a sad affair — a sad affair, by all that I can learn — and that is little enough. Such a sweet creature, too — of such heavenly beauty — But there is that horrid noise again — "

" It is nothing — I can assure you it is nothing," observed Mrs. Brace, somewhat impatiently.

" Hush! not so loud! " resumed Mrs. Lindley. " As I was saying, the young lady in question is the only one in whom Miss Walters will not find a companion."

" At all events, you will not be without society, Caroline," said Mrs. Brace, rising from her seat. " And now, my dear girl, I must leave you, for I need not declare that my time is very, very valuable just at present."

" But you will come and see me soon? " exclaimed the wretched girl, throwing herself into the milliner's arms and kissing her with that fervour which seemed to imply that the poor forlorn creature knew she was embracing her only friend.

" Yes, I will come and see you often, very often, my dear Caroline," said Mrs. Brace; and, having returned her caresses with an affectionate warmth, — or, at least, with a great display of tender feeling, — the fashionable milliner gently disengaged herself from the arms of the poor girl who clung to her with the tenaciousness of a distracted grief.

At length Mrs. Brace, having succeeded in getting away from her, hurriedly took her departure; and Caroline Walters found herself alone in that gloomy apartment with the midwife!

CHAPTER XXII

SCENES AT MRS. BRACE'S ESTABLISHMENT

It was about nine o'clock when Mrs. Brace reached her abode in Pall Mall; and, repairing to her own private parlour, — the one we have described in a previous chapter,— she threw off her cloak and bonnet, and summoned Harriet to her presence.

To her inquiries whether the letter had been duly sent to Mr. Meagles, and whether the cook had provided a succulent repast for Mr. Harley and Octavia, she received satisfactory replies; and having refreshed herself with a glass of the finest Madeira, after her journey to Mrs. Lindley's gloomy residence, she proceeded to the large room where the young ladies of her establishment were accustomed to take their meals.

This apartment was well furnished, and lighted by a chandelier suspended to the ceiling. A good fire blazed on the hearth, the table was spread with a quantity of plate, and the eleven or twelve beautiful young women, who were scattered about conversing in groups, enhanced the cheerful appearance of the scene.

We have before stated that these ravishing creatures formed a combination of charms and displayed a variety of loveliness enchanting to behold. There, indeed, all admirers of whatsoever style of beauty might have found their tastes gratified. The tall and stately young woman, with dignified looks and imposing demeanour; the sylphlike figure and the volatile disposition; the slender, pale, and interesting girl, with pensive countenance and bashful manners; the stout, robust, and full-proportioned houri, with a voluptuous exuberance of charms; the coal-black hair and the lustrous dark eyes; the flaxen ringlets and the melting azure orbs; the chestnut locks and the eyes of hazel; the glowing auburn tresses and the eyes of dark blue; the Roman countenance, denoting strong passions; the Grecian profile, indicating a poetic sensuousness; the lively French features, far more interesting than positively beautiful; the pure English face, with its admirable blending of the healthy red and the delicate white; the ravishing brunette, with eyes brimful of desire and lips that seem made only to be kissed, — these were the varied charms that made up the combination of so much female loveliness.

At about half-past nine o'clock, an excellent supper was served up. Poultry, game, French dishes, sweets, preserved fruits, and wines were spread with no niggard hand upon the board, at the head of which Mrs. Brace took her seat. And it was an enchanting spectacle to behold that really very handsome woman thus presiding at a table so well appointed in all its arrangements, and surrounded by a bevy of the most lovely girls that could possibly have been collected together.

In fact, the milliner was accustomed to regale her young ladies with the most luxurious living. She likewise paid them good salaries, and spared no expense in ensuring their comfort beneath her roof. Had they been her own daughters, she could not have treated them better. But this was of course a matter of calculation on her part. They were useful to her; they constituted the main attraction of what may be termed the public department of her establishment. For not only do fashionable ladies love to be attended upon by beautiful women, but husbands, brothers, and even friends are sure to take wives, sisters, and female acquaintances to those shops where the most charming girls are to be seen. Then again, they ensured her a choice, select, and lucrative patronage in the private branch of her avocations. For every one was sold over and over again to the aristocratic debauchees and noble or wealthy voluptuaries for whose special behoof the house in St. James's Square was kept up; and as each of the houris in her establishment yielded Mrs. Brace hundreds of guineas per annum, she could well afford to regale them in excellent style, as it was also her interest to render them satisfied with their position and retain them in her employment.

But let us glance at their behaviour at the supper-table.

A stranger would have fancied that he was contemplating one of the most pleasing scenes which could possibly be presented to his gaze, — a kind-hearted, motherly, well-bred woman presiding at a table surrounded by young ladies of elegant manners, strict propriety of conduct, and of principles as excellent as their personal loveliness was ravishing. For although they were well aware that Mrs. Brace's establishment was nothing more nor less than a brothel of the first fashion, and although Mrs. Brace herself knew that not an eye which met her own reflected the thoughts of a chaste soul, — although, in a word, the charms which graced the banqueting-board were a marketable commodity, constantly obtaining a high price, nevertheless not an improper word was uttered, not an impure idea nor even an indelicate allusion was ever syllabled by those mouths on which the hot lips of lust had been so often pressed.

After supper, Mrs. Brace and her attendant satellites proceeded into an adjoining apartment, which was denominated the "ladies' drawing-room;" and there they diverted themselves in a variety of ways until eleven o'clock. Some read romances, others played at cards, a few whiled away the time in embroidery for themselves, one or two had recourse to music, and the rest gathered around the cheerful fire to converse.

When the usual hour for retiring was proclaimed by a handsome timepiece upon the mantel, the young ladies all bade Mrs. Brace an affectionate "good night," and departed in an orderly manner — without noise, giggling, or confusion — to their respective chambers.

On the particular night of which we are speaking, and which was characterized by so many and such varied incidents, Mrs. Brace retired to her own bedroom immediately after the work-girls had quitted her; and in half an hour she sought her couch. Sleep soon visited her eyes; for, in spite of the equivocal nature of her avocation, she was not at any time much troubled with qualms of conscience.

But on the present occasion she was haunted by unpleasant dreams. The image of the unhappy Caroline Walters rose up before her mental view, reproaching her for a base violation of solemn pledges made to the deceased parents of the girl, and for foul treachery practised toward the friendless orphan. At length — as it is often the case with dreams — the figure of the wronged and outraged Caroline changed suddenly into some ghastly shape, which seated itself upon the bosom of the sleeper; and for a few minutes Mrs. Brace endured all the horrors of a nightmare.

She awoke in a cold tremor, and with a consternation in the brain. For a short time she could not persuade herself that she had been made the sport of a disordered imagination; but, as there was a light in the room, her eyes began to remark familiar objects, and she at length acquired the certainty that she was indeed safe in her own bed, and that nothing which her fevered fancy had conjured up was present to her view.

Referring to her watch, which lay on a night-table within reach, she found that it was only one o'clock in the morning, and that she had not slept more than an hour and a half. Settling herself, therefore, in the most comfortable position to woo the embraces of slumber, she closed her eyes, and was already beginning to feel a soft and dreamy repose stealing over her, when a strange sound caused her to wake suddenly up with a nervous start.

She listened with breathless attention, and all was still.

Was it, then, a false alarm? — perhaps the first phase in another hideous dream that was about to whirl her in imagination through the horrors of a second nightmare? Her mouth was parched, and she refreshed her palate with some sweet and delicious beverage that stood upon the night-table.

But as she put down the glass another strange sound fell upon her ears. Again she listened; the noise was continued, and, as she racked her imagination to conjecture what it could be, the thought flashed to her mind that it resembled the sawing of wood.

Mrs. Brace was a courageous woman naturally. She moreover knew that there were three persons of the male sex beneath the roof at that moment, namely, her two footmen and Mr. Harley. Succour might therefore be reckoned upon in case of danger; and this reflection decided the milliner how to act.

Hastily thrusting her feet into slippers and enveloping herself in her cloak, she stole cautiously forth from her bedchamber. Then she paused on the landing, and listened.

The strange noise had ceased; but she fancied that she heard voices whispering somewhere below.

It often seems as if our organs had the faculty of rendering themselves more sensitive and keen on those occasions when their ordinary powers would scarcely answer the desired purpose or serve the sudden emergency, and thus it was in the present instance. For, as Mrs. Brace held her breath to listen, her auricular sense acquired a remarkable vividness; and she distinctly heard the sounds of two rough voices whispering together in a very subdued tone. A few words that she caught, such as "saw," "crowbar," and "skeleton keys," convinced her beyond all possibility of doubt that thieves had obtained an entry into the house; and it was the dining-room door which they were thus deliberating how to force open, it being invariably locked every night by Mrs. Brace herself ere she retired to rest.

All her plate was kept in the sideboard in that apartment; and she was suddenly seized with a mortal apprehension lest the robbers should possess themselves of so valuable a prize ere she could summon the necessary assistance. For, on second thoughts, she dared not call Mr. Harley to her aid, — there were reasons why he must not stand the chance of being recognized in that house, even by thieves; and she would have to descend the staircase and pass into the dwelling looking on St. James's Square in order to arouse her footmen.

What, then, was to be done? Moments, nay, minutes were flying; and every one was precious.

Bending her head over the banisters, she listened again. The men had succeeded in forcing open the door of the dining-room, and there was not an instant to lose.

It would be useless to awaken the young ladies and the female servants. Such a proceeding might alarm the robbers it was true, but would not perhaps prevent them from making off at once with the booty already in their reach. The only wise expedient was to summon the footmen, and on this alternative she resolved, at any risk.

Descending the stairs as noiselessly as possible in the dark, Mrs Brace had gained the ground floor, and was on the point of entering the passage leading into the other house, when a light suddenly appeared upon the threshold of the dining-room, and as villainous a countenance as the imagination could ever associate with the name of " burglar " was simultaneously revealed to her eyes.

A scream rose to her lips; but it was stifled at the moment it was bursting forth, — stifled, too, not by any abrupt violence on the part of the robber, but by a sudden consternation which seized upon the lady. A spell appeared to have been thrown around her all in an instant; a tremendous stupefaction, a mental paralysis, had struck her dumb, motionless, powerless.

At the same moment a faint exclamation of ineffable surprise escaped the lips of the burglar; and he also appeared to be riveted to the spot with a bewilderment that defies all attempt at description.

For nearly a minute did Mrs. Brace and the burglar stand gazing fixedly upon each other, he still holding a candle in his hand, she leaning against the wall to which she had staggered when the man's countenance first met her view; he half-doubting whether his eyes were not deceiving him, she every instant acquiring a deeper conviction that the features on which her looks were riveted were indeed familiar to her.

But the ejaculation which dropped from the tongue of the burglar had caught the ear of his companion, who was inside the dining-room; and Mrs. Brace, therefore, speedily beheld another countenance appear in the doorway. This second face was red, bloated, and sinister — indeed, almost as vile and repulsive as the first, but it was totally unknown to the milliner.

The stupefaction which had seized upon her now rapidly yielded to a sense of the very painful position in which she was placed. She no longer even thought of summoning assistance; and, as to uttering a cry, her lips were sealed. Instead of hoping to have the burglars handed over to the grasp of justice, she felt that she herself was completely in the power of one — consequently of both.

Suddenly mustering up all her presence of mind, and calling all her courage to her aid, Mrs. Brace advanced a few paces, motioning to the men to enter the room. Perceiving that she was about to follow them, they fell back; and then, the instant they had disappeared from the doorway, a pang shot through the brain of the milliner, and, pressing her hand to her brow, she felt for a moment as if her reason were deserting her. But this terrible sensation almost immediately passed away; and, with a ghastly pallor of countenance, trembling limbs, and a heart palpitating violently, she crossed the threshold, closing the door behind her.

For nearly half an hour did Mrs. Brace remain in the company of the two burglars; but of the nature of their interview we can at present form no conjecture. That painful reminiscences had been revived and feelings of intense anguish excited on her part, we can, however, affirm; for when the door again opened and she came forth, it was with features even more ghastly and corpselike than when she had entered that room.

Whether the robbers went away empty-handed, or not, we cannot state; but for one fact we can vouch, namely, that the plate remained untouched on the sideboard, and that no valuables of any kind were plundered from the dining-room.

Mrs. Brace herself conducted them to the shop door, which they had forced open in the first instance by means of skeleton keys and a crowbar; and when they had quitted the house she sank down upon a chair, covered her face with her hands, and burst into a flood of convulsive weeping.

These tears relieved her; and, hurrying away from the shop, she stole cautiously back to her own bedchamber, which she gained without disturbing a soul.

Sleep visited not her eyes for the remainder of that night. Painful thoughts racked her imagination and banished slumber; but as the hours passed slowly, slowly away, her excitement subsided, and she grew much calmer. It is often easy to conjure back hope where its presence is indispensable; and thus was it that Mrs. Brace succeeded in persuading herself that she should not again be molested by the dreaded individual who had paid her dwelling so ominous a visit during the night.

She rose shortly after five o'clock, and entered her bathroom, where she plunged into the ice-cold water. Alike in winter and in summer did Mrs. Brace bathe her entire person in this manner; hence the well-preserved condition of her charms, and the plumpness of her form's voluptuous contours.

But never had the luxury of the cold bath appeared so truly refreshing as on this occasion. It cooled her heated brain, invigorated her entire frame, rendered languid by want of rest, and raised her depressed spirits almost to their usual tone. But if her cheeks still retained somewhat of the pallor that the incident of the past night had left upon them, a cosmetic skilfully applied gave her the complexion of so soft a rose that it was impossible to recognize this triumph of art over nature.

It was shortly after six o'clock that Mrs. Brace descended to her own parlour, where the fire was already lighted. But scarcely had she entered that room when the lady's-maid burst in with terror depicted upon her countenance, and exclaiming, "Oh, madam, a robbery has been committed during this night!"

Mrs. Brace affected to be sadly alarmed at this announcement; and, following the abigail, she hurried to the dining-room, the door of which had been opened by sawing partially around the lock, and then breaking the wood away with a crowbar, none of the burglars' skeleton keys having previously succeeded in enabling them to effect an entrance. The sideboard had likewise been forced, and all the plate taken out; but, on examining it, not a single article was missing. This circumstance naturally induced the lady's-maid to observe that the burglars were most probably interrupted by some false alarm in the middle of their work, — a belief which the milliner took care to encourage, protesting, however, that it was very strange how so much violence could have been used without in reality disturbing a single soul.

From the dining-room Mrs. Brace and Harriet proceeded to the shop, where nothing had been meddled with. This was not, however, astonishing, as the robbers could not be supposed likely to trouble themselves with bonnets, dresses, and lace caps. The front door had been forced in the manner already described; but as nothing appeared to have been stolen in the house, full confirmation was thus given to the abigail's opinion that the burglars were unexpectedly disturbed by some false alarm, which, however, had the effect of inducing them to beat a precipitate retreat.

While Mrs. Brace and Harriet were conducting their investigations in the shop, the young ladies made their appearance in twos and threes at a time, and they were much alarmed at first on hearing that thieves had visited the house during the night; but they were speedily tranquillized by the assurance that nothing had been stolen. Mrs. Brace intimated her desire that no unpleasant notice on the part of the public should be attracted toward the establishment by suffering the particulars of the attempted robbery to transpire; and thus the affair was effectually hushed up.

Scarcely had the milliner returned to her own parlour — it being now nearly seven o'clock in the morning — when Lord Florimel was announced by the footman whose duty it was to attend the door in St. James's Square, by which means of entrance, be it recollected, all persons of the male sex were introduced into the establishment.

The young nobleman had been home to his splendid mansion in Piccadilly, and had resumed his male attire; but it was really difficult to decide which became him most, and this, indeed, was the observation that Mrs. Brace made the moment the footman had retired.

" And now tell me of your success, my dear Florimel," she continued, with an arch smile which enabled her to display her very fine teeth. " Your countenance is pale and pensively interesting — "

" Tell me, my dear friend," he abruptly exclaimed, " has Octavia taken her departure yet? "

" Oh, no," responded the milliner. " She can scarcely have slept off the effects of the wine in which the narcotic was mixed, and a glass of which her gallant administered to her. For Harriet was present at the time, and saw her take it."

" Then she is safe! " ejaculated Florimel, with strange emphasis.

" What do you mean? " demanded Mrs. Brace, gazing upon the nobleman with unfeigned surprise.

" My dear friend, do not seek explanations at present," he returned, in a tone slightly petulant; " you shall learn everything in the course of the day. I will come presently and have a long discourse with you. Nay, do not appear angry and pout," he added, patting her plump cheek with his delicate white hand, and resuming his wonted kindness of manner toward her.

" I cannot possibly be angry with you. Florimel," said Mrs. Brace, instantly recovering a gay expression of countenance, while her eyes beamed with desire as he thus caressed her. " But has anything extraordinary occurred? "

" Nothing very particular — only that I have not succeeded with Pauline, and that I am far from sorry at the failure of my enterprise."

" You speak in enigmas," exclaimed the milliner.

" I will explain the whole by and by, my dear friend. In the meantime I must fulfil a solemn promise which I have made to Pauline," continued the nobleman, " and this is, to induce Octavia to return home without delay — for her father has come back! "

" Her father come back! " repeated Mrs. Brace, turning pale even through the artificial tint of her complexion. " Then all will be discovered — "

" Nothing will be discovered if you only consent to do as I require," interrupted Florimel.

At this moment Harriet entered the room, and whispered something in the ear of Mrs. Brace.

" You wish to see Octavia? " said the latter, turning toward Florimel, as soon as she had received the communication thus privately made to her by the abigail.

" Yes — without delay," answered the nobleman, emphatically.

Mrs. Brace made a sign to Harriet, who instantly quitted the room.

" Is anything the matter? " demanded Florimel, uneasily.

" Nothing of any consequence. Octavia's gallant has taken his departure, and the young lady herself, though comparatively pacified by all her lover has said to her this morning, nevertheless shrinks from the idea of returning home."

" I will undertake to tranquillize her completely," said Florimel. " Have the kindness to order a hackney-coach at once."

Mrs. Brace rung the bell, and gave the footman the requisite instructions. Immediately afterward Octavia, dressed in her bonnet and shawl, was introduced by Harriet; but on perceiving that Mrs. Brace was not alone, she was about to retire, when the milliner hastily observed, " Fear nothing, Miss Clarendon, this nobleman is a friend. Indeed, you may place the utmost confidence in Lord Florimel," she added, by way of making her acquainted with his name and rank.

Octavia, who was very pale and had evidently been weeping, surveyed the young peer with a countenance expressive of mingled surprise and shame, — surprised at the emphatic way in which Mrs. Brace had alluded to him as a friend, and shame at the idea that he was probably no stranger to her frailty.

But with that winning manner which seemed natural to him, and which on account of its feminine softness was so well calculated to inspire confidence, Lord Florimel approached her, took her hand, and said, in a reassuring tone, "I am indeed a friend, Miss Clarendon; and in that light I wish you to consider me. But we have not a moment to delay in unnecessary discourse. You must return home immediately. Your sister, who is an angel of goodness, will receive you with open arms, and you may likewise expect to embrace your father — "

"My father!" repeated Octavia, with a convulsive start, and with a wild expression suddenly springing up in her eyes.

"Fear nothing, I say. Your father suspects not your absence, and need not know it," Florimel hastened to observe. "Pauline is the depositress of your secret, and she would sooner die than betray you."

"Pauline knows all! — my father is returned!" gasped the wretched girl, sinking upon a chair; and then a flood of tears came to her relief.

"In the name of heaven compose yourself, Miss Clarendon!" said Mrs. Brace, caressing her with a great show of affection. "Do you not comprehend what this kind nobleman has told you? Your sister has learned your secret, and will do all she can to aid you — "

"It is this that cuts me to the soul," exclaimed Octavia, bitterly; "for how shall I be able to look my pure and virtuous sister in the face?"

"She loves you, loves you tenderly, Miss Clarendon," said Florimel. "But, for heaven's sake, come! It is now seven o'clock, and you must be home before eight."

Octavia started up, dried her tears, and, with the dread of her father's wrath arming her with sudden energy, declared her readiness to depart.

But as it would be dangerous to the reputation of Mrs.

Brace's establishment for a lady and gentleman to be seen issuing forth together at that early hour in the morning, the milliner undertook to accompany Octavia in the hackney-coach as far as Piccadilly, where Florimel could join them and take her place.

This was accordingly done. The vehicle, with Mrs. Brace and the young lady inside, proceeded as far as the beginning of Bond Street, where it waited for Florimel, who passed out of the establishment by the house in St. James's Square. The milliner then alighted, the nobleman took his seat by Octavia's side, and the coach moved rapidly off toward the Edgeware Road.

Florimel now proceeded, in terms as delicate as possible, to give his fair companion certain necessary explanations. He told her how he had heard of her sister's charms and was resolved to win her heart, how he had called on the previous evening in female attire, how Pauline had discovered his treachery by some inadvertent expressions he had used, how he fell upon his knees before her and besought her forgiveness, and how a virtuous passion had superseded the base intentions that had originally animated him.

He then informed Octavia that, while he and her sister were seated together in the back parlour, her father had unexpectedly arrived, that Pauline had succeeded in inducing him to believe that Octavia had already retired to rest, and that he (Florimel) had subsequently quieted Pauline's alarms by declaring that he knew where her sister was and would guarantee her safe return before eight in the morning. He added that being in Mrs. Brace's confidence he was acquainted with Octavia's amour; but he assured her that he neither knew, nor sought to learn, who was the object of her affection.

Octavia scarcely comprehended all these details, for there was a confusion in her brain. She, however, understood enough to convince her that Pauline would save her from exposure in respect to her father — and that was all she cared for!

The explanations of Lord Florimel had scarcely reached their conclusion when the coach came within sight of the villa; and the nobleman ordered it to stop. Octavia alighted, and, having murmured a few words of gratitude to her generous friend, she hurried away toward the house.

Florimel waited until he saw Pauline appear at the garden gate to receive her sister; and the hasty signal which the younger Miss Clarendon made to him, as he kept his head out of the carriage window, convinced him that Octavia was in time to escape detection on the part of her sire.

He then ordered the coachman to take him to his own residence in Piccadilly.

CHAPTER XXIII

MR. PAGE'S RESEARCHES

Our readers will remember that we left Mr. Page in his bed at the George and Blue Boar, at the time when awaking in the morning after his night's adventures in the eastern district of London, he found himself attacked by a violent fit of rheumatism. It will likewise be recollected that he sent for medical assistance; and the doctor immediately recommended him to take a warm bath. This the commercial traveller did; and, on returning to his bed, he fell into a sound sleep.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when he awoke; and he found himself so much better that he got up and sat by the fire. A basin of mock-turtle soup, which he then discussed, appeared to improve him still more; and he was able to walk about his room with comparative ease, the rheumatism having subsided into a mere sensation of stiffness in the limbs.

On making inquiries of the waiter, he ascertained that his employer, Mr. Hodson, had called in the course of the day; but on being informed that Page was asleep, the merchant had taken his departure, as he was unwilling to disturb him.

Our readers have seen quite enough of the commercial traveller to be well aware that his disposition was of the most restless, bustling, and excitable nature; and they will not therefore be surprised when we inform them that he was most anxious to make certain researches suggested by one of the papers contained in the pocketbook.

This document was the scrap whereon the following lines were scrawled with a pencil, and in a tremulous hand:

" Look under the stone in the farthest corner of the room, in the cellar. Use it wisely, Julia — and you will prosper; act rashly — and you will be ruined."

That this note was written by the old man who had died in his presence on the preceding night, Page was tolerably well convinced; because that individual had spoken of Julia as his "ungrateful daughter," — and Julia's name was mentioned in the document. In fact, the intimation therein contained was addressed to her: and to what could it allude save a treasure?

Page had it all cut and dried in his imagination. The old man must have been a miser — and Julia must become an heiress! It was evident, by the existence of the note itself, that this Julia was unaware of the locality where her father kept his money — even if she knew that he had any money at all. Therefore, if Page could succeed in possessing himself of the treasure without her knowledge, so much the better; if not, then he could but propose to marry her — and he should become a rich man in either case.

Such was the castle-building in which the commercial traveller indulged, as he sat by the fire in his chamber; and to such a pitch of sanguine enthusiasm did his fertile and active imagination carry him, that he came to a conclusion of how silly it would be to permit the least unnecessary delay to occur ere he set about looking after the treasure.

Accordingly, he resolved to issue forth at once in search of that miserable court which had been the scene of the previous night's adventures. The rheumatism had pretty nearly left him, — and, even if it had not, what cared he so long as he could drag one leg after another ? But, then, was he not about to venture into the very jaws of danger? Might he not encounter the Magsman or some of that formidable fellow's adherents who knew him and who would thrust him back into the dungeon whence he had escaped with so much difficulty? All this was perfectly true; but were not the risks worth running? Page thought so; his avarice was excited, and his courage rose in proportion.

The clocks were striking six in the evening, — that same evening which Lord Florimel passed with Pauline, and on which Mrs. Brace took Caroline Walters to the midwife's house in Lambeth, — as Mr. Page, enveloped in his cloak, stepped into a hackney-coach in Holborn, and ordered himself to be driven to the East London Dock. At this point he alighted; and, having dismissed the vehicle, began to take, as well as he could possibly remember, the same route which he had traversed in a contrary direction on the previous night.

Plunging into the maze of dark, dirty, and dangerous streets, he found that it was no easy task to trace a particular course in such a wilderness of brick and mortar, without the knowledge of even the names of the various thoroughfares. But Page was not readily baffled; he had a grand object in view, and never had he felt so bold and so enterprising. By dint of perseverance he began to discover certain salient features which he remembered to have noticed on the former occasion: here, for instance, was a tavern with a flagstaff on the roof, there was the local roundhouse, or cage, with the watchman's box at the side; here was a carrier's establishment, with two or three vans standing in the street, there was a blacksmith's forge, where the heavy hammers rang, and the glowing furnace blazed all night long; here, again, was a public-house with another remarkable sign that could not fail to be recognized even in the darkness, and there was a low boozing-ken, the door of which being always open, afforded the passers-by a view of the loathsome interior, the aspect of which would not be very readily forgotten.

Thus picking his way, and ever and anon recognizing points or features which might be termed the landmarks of the district, Mr. Page at last succeeded in discovering the court whereof he was in search. For a moment his heart failed him as he plunged his looks up the low entrance-archway and thought of the noisome dungeon at the end; but when he beheld lights gleaming from many windows, his courage revived, for he thought within himself, "All the inhabitants of this court cannot be thieves or murderers; and as neither the Magsman nor his adherents should capture me without a desperate resistance on my part, assistance would surely arrive from some quarter or another in answer to my cries."

As this reflection passed through his mind, the commercial traveller mechanically placed his hands upon his coat pockets to feel whether his pistols were safe; and at the same time he turned boldly into the court.

Not a soul was to be seen, all the doors were shut, but shouts of revelry and boisterous mirth came from some of the dwellings, while shrieks and oaths bore unmistakable testimony to the violent quarrels that were going on in others.

Page knocked at the house which was the object of his visit to this quarter of the metropolis; and he was just thinking what course he should adopt in case his summons remained unanswered, when the door was opened by a young female holding a light in her hand. She was poorly dressed, but by no means bad-looking, for her features were regular, and her figure was good; but the dark circles around the eyes, the peculiar redness of the lips, and the extreme paleness of the cheeks, gave her a dissipated air, while the boldness of her looks at once proclaimed the unblushing courtezan.

" Who are you? " she demanded, abruptly, almost insolently, upon opening the door.

" If your name is Julia," said Page, hastily, — for he did not admire the circumstance of being kept standing in the court, " it is of the utmost importance that I should have a private conversation with you as soon as possible."

" But who are you, I again ask? " cried the young woman, hesitating whether to admit the visitor, or not — indeed, uncertain whether to regard him as friend or foe.

" I was present at your father's death last night," returned Page, in a solemn and impressive manner.

" Then walk in," said Julia, standing back to allow him room to enter the narrow passage; and when he had complied with the invitation, she closed and fastened the door. Leading the way into an empty room opening from the passage, she placed the candle on the mantelpiece, observing, in a comparatively civil tone, " I am sorry, sir, that I cannot ask you up-stairs to the only chamber where there is any furniture, but, as you may suppose, my father is laid out there, and I can't endure to look on a dead body."

" No apology is necessary," said Page. " An accident brought me into this house last night, and hearing moans up-stairs, I went to see if I could render any assistance — "

" And you found my father dying? " interrupted the girl, her voice indicating some emotion. " I didn't know that he was so bad, or I wouldn't have left him. In fact, when I went out in the evening, he was sitting up and able to walk, for he came down and bolted the front door after me, as was his wont — "

" Ah! I remember that the door was bolted inside, when I first entered the house," exclaimed Page. " But how did you obtain admittance — "

" Rather let me ask how you got into this place in the first instance? " cried the girl, now surveying the commercial traveller with looks indicative of mistrust.

" I will satisfy you on that head, Julia," was his immediate answer. " It was by the back way that I came hither — "

" Ah! then you are one of the gentlemen who escaped from the cellar in the next house? " exclaimed the young woman, her countenance clearing up. " Well — don't be afraid — I am not going to betray you. But you asked me how I got into the place, since there was no one — living," she added, with a cold shudder, " to open the door. Why, I did not come back until about eight o'clock this morning," she continued, " and then I was accosted in the court by Briggs — "

" Who's Briggs? " demanded the commercial traveller.

" The man that keeps the house next door," was the answer.

" Is he a great stout fellow, with an immense wen upon the crown of his bald head? " inquired Page.

" Just so," replied the girl; and the commercial traveller learned accordingly that the individual alluded to was the same who had made him write the letter to Mr. Hodson, and who had given him the glass of gin. " Well," resumed Julia, " this man Briggs called me into his room next door, told me that a couple of gentlemen had escaped out of his cellar during the night, and begged me not to say a word about it in the neighbourhood. Of course it was no business of mine; and, as I wanted to get into my own house, Briggs let me pass through the opening which you had made in the wall. This was the way that I got in, and, on going up-stairs, I found my father a corpse in his bed. In the course of the day I noticed that the front door had been unbolted and unlocked, and I was surprised. But now you have explained the mystery."

" Was your father very rich, Julia? " asked Page, fixing upon her a searching look.

" Rich! " she ejaculated, with an ironical laugh.

"Ah! I see — my suspicions are confirmed — he was a miser," exclaimed the commercial traveller. "But you don't know — you haven't any idea where he was accustomed to conceal his wealth?" and again he bent his eyes significantly on the young woman.

"Not I, indeed!" she observed, in a strange tone. "Nevertheless," she added, almost immediately, "there must have been a large quantity — "

"Of gold somewhere — eh?" cried Page, chuckling. "Yes, yes, you are right there, my dear. And now, what will you do for me if I help you to — to — this treasure?" he demanded, hesitating whether he should impart his secret to her, or devise some scheme to become the sole possessor of the wealth to which he supposed the scrap of paper to allude.

"What will I do for you?" she exclaimed. "Anything you like."

"It would be a pity to divide it," remarked Page, again eying her significantly. "A sum of money that is a fortune in itself, only makes two poor competencies when split into equal shares."

"Pray explain yourself," observed the young woman, impatiently.

"I suppose — that is, I hope — I believe — I presume you are a single woman, Julia?" said the commercial traveller, endeavouring to ogle her tenderly.

"Oh, that I am!" she exclaimed, flippantly. "What next?"

"Nothing particular now — at least on that point," returned Page. "But we must at once pass on to another important feature in the business which we have in hand together. Is this your father's writing?" he demanded, with a cunning look, as he produced the scrap of paper.

Julia took the documentary fragment in her hand, glanced rapidly over it, and, with a sudden animation of countenance, exclaimed, "Yes — this is the old man's writing: and now we may be rich for the remainder of our days!"

"I thought so!" ejaculated Page, delighted at finding his fondest hopes thus completely fulfilled. "Come, let us visit the cellar without delay, and inspect the treasure. I will then tell you why I asked whether you were married or not."

The girl smiled significantly, as if she read her companion's meaning and required no further explanation; and Page was pleased to observe that she possessed a very good set of teeth.

They now descended the stairs to the kitchen, where Julia lighted a lantern, observing that the draught would blow out the candle; and thence they proceeded to the cellar.

The first object which met the eyes of the commercial traveller was the pile of masonry which had been detached from the aperture that had enabled himself and Sir Richard Stamford to escape from the adjoining cellar on the preceding night; and a chill passed over him as he thought of the possibility of his revisit to that neighbourhood being discovered by the ruffian Briggs or any of his vile confederates, the consequence of which detection would inevitably be a reconsignment to his old quarters, with unconquerable precautions against another escape.

He therefore hesitated for a few moments on the upper step leading into the cellar, and was almost inclined to beat a precipitate retreat; but Julia, who had preceded him, held the lantern high up so as to fling the light upon the spot which she indicated, as she observed, " There's the stone which the paper alludes to."

The idea of being within reach, as it were, of a treasure which his imagination represented to be of no insignificant amount, restored Page to that desperate courage wherewith he had armed himself for the present enterprise; and boldly descending the steps, he proceeded to inspect the stone beneath which the miser's hoardings lay.

" It will require some strong instrument to raise it," he observed, at the expiration of a few moments.

" There is a pickaxe in the kitchen," said Julia, " and I have often wondered what it could be for. Now I understand why my father sometimes required such a thing."

Thus speaking, she tripped lightly away to fetch the implement, while Page retraced his steps to the threshold of the cellar, so as to guard against any treacherous intention which might possibly exist on the girl's part to close the door upon him.

On her return in about a minute, with the pickaxe in her hand, she immediately conjectured what was passing in the mind of the commercial traveller; for, gazing intently upon his countenance, the young woman said, " You are perhaps right as a prudent man to mistrust me; but if you knew how much I hate the people next door — I mean Briggs and all his friends — you would not be alarmed. Besides, have you not come on a business which may prove beneficial to me? — and why, therefore, should I seek to do you an injury? "

" I am glad you have spoken to me in this manner," said Page, perceiving that Julia was rapidly losing her sullenness of temper and acquiring confidence in him; " because it makes me feel all the more pleasure in coöperating with you. You are a nice girl, Julia," he added, patting her face and again ogling her tenderly, which little indications of the matrimonial views which she suspected him to entertain were far from disagreeable to the girl.

" Now, then, get to work," she exclaimed, smiling, and fixing her bold eyes wantonly on the commercial traveller.

He returned the leer, and took the pickaxe from her hand; then, throwing back his cloak, he commenced operations. The mortar which surrounded the flagstone was not particularly hard; and the task of raising it was speedily accomplished. When it was removed, half a dozen canvas bags of tolerable size appeared in a small hollow beneath.

" Six thousand guineas, at the lowest computation! " ejaculated Mr. Page, his heart leaping with delight; and, taking up one of the bags, he weighed it in his hand. " Yes, this contains a thousand, I am sure! " he added, in a tone of exultation.

" How shall we remove them? " asked Julia, also in a joyous manner; " and where shall we take them to? "

" First into the kitchen — or up-stairs, in the room to which you showed me just now," responded the commercial traveller.

This latter suggestion was immediately adopted; and when the bags had been conveyed to the empty chamber on the ground floor and ranged upon the mantelpiece in such a fashion that Mr. Page could embrace the entire array with one gloating glance, he said, " Now, my pretty Julia, we must decide upon our future proceedings. In me you behold a commercial traveller of high respectability and old standing, capable of giving the most satisfactory references. I am unmarried, and have long wanted a wife. What do you say? Can you be happy as Mrs. Page? If so the bargain is soon struck and the fortune need not be divided."

" Well, if you're willing to take me as I am," responded the young woman, unhesitatingly, " I'm sure I cannot object to take you as you are. But we must leave this place together — I mean that we must not separate till the — the — "

" Till the knot is tied — eh, Julia? " added Mr. Page, throwing his arm around her waist and imprinting a kiss upon her lips, which latter process made him aware of the fact that she had recently partaken of a liquor smelling marvellously like gin; but he was not disposed to be over-nice under the circumstances.

" Yes, that is what I meant," she observed. " If you are going to make a lady of me, the sooner the better. But my father was a gentleman once, by all accounts," added Julia, with some degree of mournfulness in her tone, as her thoughts were thus suddenly brought back to the memory of her deceased parent.

" By the bye, what is your surname, my dear? " inquired Page.

" Lightfoot," was the answer.

" I thought so! " ejaculated the commercial traveller.

" What do you mean? " demanded the young woman. " Do you know anything about us? "

" Yes — something — but no matter now," replied Page. " We will talk of all that by and by. For the present we have other business to think of. Stay here we cannot — those villains next door would find me out; and yet how to leave the house until your father is buried — "

" I have already given directions relative to the funeral, which will take place as privately as possible three days hence," interrupted Julia. " In the meantime we can remain together; for even if you had not come here to-night and I had never known you, I should not have stayed any longer in the house with the corpse."

" Come, then," said Page, " we will depart at once. If you have a good strong piece of cord, I will fasten four of these bags around my waist, and my mantle will cover them.

The other two you can carry under your shawl or cloak, whichever you possess."

" Stay one moment," exclaimed Julia; and, quitting the room, she hastened up-stairs.

In about a minute she returned, wearing her bonnet and cloak, and carrying a small bundle in her hand. She likewise brought a piece of rope, wherewith the commercial traveller slung four of the bags around his body. The young woman took charge of the remainder of the treasure; and when she had ascertained, by peeping forth from the front door, that the coast was clear, she and her companion quitted the house together.

On emerging from the court, Page directed Julia to guide him by the nearest route toward Tower Hill, where they entered a hackney-coach, which drove them, according to the instructions given, to a tavern in Farringdon Street. There they took up their quarters for the night; inasmuch as the commercial traveller knew very well that he would not be allowed to introduce his female friend to the George and Blue Boar, Holborn.

On the ensuing morning, shortly after nine o'clock, Mr. Page and Julia Lightfoot crossed over the way to the Fleet Prison; and in that establishment they speedily found a parson, who, for the handsome recompense of half a crown and a gallon of ale, tied the matrimonial knot and pronounced the nuptial benediction. For at that period Fleet marriages were lawful; and thus the couple who had only known each other a few hours, were made indissolubly one.

The reader may perhaps be startled at the circumstance of this ceremony taking place while the corpse of Julia's father was yet above the grounds; but she was anxious on her part to nail a husband while he was in the humour to take her, and who, as she termed it, could " make a lady of her; " while he, on the other hand, was equally solicitous to establish a right to that treasure which, until the nuptials were celebrated, belonged wholly and solely to the young woman. Thus all feeling of delicacy was superseded by selfish interest on either side.

As soon as the marriage rites were thus performed by a drunken parson, assisted by an insolvent prize-fighter who fulfilled the duties of clerk, and in the presence of three or four male and female prisoners who attended as witnesses, Mr. and Mrs. Page drove into Southwark, where they took a genteel lodging, at which we must leave them for the present.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FATHER AND DAUGHTERS

It is now necessary that we should return to Octavia Clarendon, at the moment when, having taken leave of Lord Florimel, who had escorted her home in the manner already described, she encountered Pauline at the garden gate.

But the instant that she met her sister's gaze the blood gushed in a full tide to her countenance, before so pale; and the words that she would have uttered seemed to rise like a torrent of lava to her throat, remaining there with suffocating effect, and unable to obtain utterance.

" Octavia — my beloved Octavia, restrain your feelings," said Pauline, speaking in low, hurried tones, as she waved her handkerchief as a signal to Lord Florimel, whom she beheld looking forth from the window of the hackney-coach at a little distance. " All is well — our father suspects not your absence," she added, with equal haste.

" Oh, Pauline! do you not despise your sister? " murmured Octavia, now recovering the powers of her voice.

" For God's sake, talk not thus! " was the young maiden's rapid adjuration, as she led the way into the house, followed by her sister.

They ascended to their bedchamber, where Octavia threw aside her bonnet and shawl; then, flinging herself into Pauline's arms, she burst into tears.

" Not a word relative to anything that has occurred ! " whispered the younger sister, affectionately pressing the other to her bosom.

" But what can you think of me, Pauline? what opinion can you entertain of one who — My God! " she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself, " wherefore is it that the rose-entwined path of love should be interspersed with thorns?"

"I conjure you not to give way to these emotions, sister, dearest sister!" murmured Pauline, tears trickling down her cheeks. "Do you not know that I love you? If you are unhappy, is it I who will augment the anguish you already experience? Oh, heavens — no! I have done all I could to screen you, I will do all I can to comfort and console you!"

"Beloved Pauline!" exclaimed Octavia, again and again embracing her kind-hearted sister. Then, growing more composed, she said, "It is a terrible necessity which now compels me to prepare to meet my father and subdue the blushes that shame would bring to my cheeks."

"Every word you utter, Octavia, appears to express a regret for what is past," returned Pauline, now surveying her sister with the tenderest solicitude. "Is it possible you can have learned to love one who is unworthy of you, and whose name you would blush to mention?"

"No — no," answered Octavia, in an impassioned tone. "He whom I love is the noblest, the kindest, and the best of men; and in a few days he will seek an introduction to my father. He will then become a constant visitor to the house, and, after the lapse of a proper interval, he will demand my hand in marriage."

"Then what have you to deplore so deeply?" asked Pauline, delighted with this assurance, and seeking, in the generosity of her soul, to make it even the means of glossing over her sister's fault.

"I do not deplore having given my love to Mr. Harley," responded Octavia, now speaking with the pride of a woman the immensity of whose love is her boast, because she believes herself to be as fondly loved in return.

"Mr. Harley!" ejaculated Pauline, in unfeigned astonishment.

"Yes, it is he who is to become my husband," replied Octavia.

"This revelation to me is another source of joy," observed the younger sister, her countenance becoming still more radiant, "because I am certain that he is an honourable man. His bearing, his conversation, his delicate attentions, his frank and ingenuous manners, his looks, all, all bespeak him to be of nature's nobility!" cried the enthusiastic girl, proclaiming the honest convictions of her candid and unsuspecting soul.

"And therefore, dear Pauline," said Octavia, into whose bosom the full tide of confidence, truthfulness, and joy was rapidly transfusing from that of her sister, — "and therefore do I not regret having given my love to him. But I was unhappy, my heart was weighed down, my spirits were depressed, because I feared lest I should become an object of scorn and shame in the eyes of her whom I love and who is so generous and so kind toward me."

"No, never, never!" exclaimed Pauline, and again the sisters embraced fondly. "Is not this singular," said the younger maiden, after a short pause, "that we should both experience love's passion almost at the same time? For I also love, Octavia," she added, looking down and with blushes suffusing her cheeks; "yes, I have suddenly learned to love that handsome young nobleman who brought you home."

"He told me somewhat of your singular interview, but I was too bewildered to comprehend his words in their full sense," observed Octavia. "I, however, understood enough to know that he sought you in the first instance with an evil intent, and that your virtue subdued him and excited an honourable passion in his soul."

"Such was the case," answered Pauline. "I will make you acquainted with all the details when we have more leisure to converse together," she added, secretly pleased to evade the subject; for the reminiscences of the past night brought the burning blushes to her cheeks, innocent in her virgin purity as she still was. "We must now descend to the breakfast-table; our father will doubtless soon leave his room. And remember, Octavia, should he remark upon his late arrival, remember, I say, that he believed us to have retired to rest hours before; for, when he knocked at the door, I hurried up-stairs from the back parlour, where I was seated with Lord Florimel, so that I might show a light in the bedroom ere I descended to open the door. I likewise put on my cloak, that he might believe I had hastily risen and had thrown on a few clothes for that purpose."

It was strongly repulsive to Pauline's feelings to utter these little falsehoods in order to impart such a colouring to the incidents that her sister might not suspect Lord

Florimel to have actually been in the bedchamber with her, instead of in the back parlour as she stated; but she would rather even thus condescend to misrepresentation than have her virtue suspected even for an instant by confessing that her prolonged interview with the nobleman had positively occurred in the sleeping-apartment.

Octavia, being now composed and having recovered her presence of mind, descended to the breakfast-table with her sister. There they were speedily joined by Mr. Clarendon, who embraced both his daughters not only with the affectionate satisfaction attendant upon his return home, but likewise with the joy of a parent who has good tidings to impart to his children. Octavia's heart fluttered, and she felt herself blushing and then turning pale a dozen times in a minute, as she received her father's caresses; for she could not resist the reflection that she was pure and chaste when he bade her adieu ere he set out upon his journey, and that it was not with the guilelessness of an innocent heart that she could greet his return.

But Mr. Clarendon did not observe his elder daughter's emotions; and as he made no remark respecting any circumstance attending his late arrival, but began almost immediately to give an account of his journey, her trepidation was speedily soothed and her confidence restored.

It appeared that Mr. Clarendon, on presenting himself at Marchmont Castle in Derbyshire, was received by his noble cousin with a readiness and a cordiality which both amazed and delighted him. The reason of this remarkable and most unexpected condescension on the part of Lord Marchmont was, however, soon explained. This haughty peer was a widower and had but one son, the Honourable Arthur Eaton, who was about three and twenty years of age. Until within a few months of the period of which we are writing, this youthful scion of a noble house had enjoyed such excellent health that he had never known a day's illness; but all of a sudden his constitution appeared to give way, — not with a gradual approach of premature decay, but with an abruptness as if some vital chords in the heart had broken and existence was only held by the few feeble ligaments which remained. The colour forsook his cheeks, his frame, hitherto vigorous though never robust, grew debilitated, his appetite failed him, and he could not induce himself to take enough nourishment to repair the waste of his body. The most eminent physicians were consulted; and they pronounced the affliction to be an unusually inveterate state of atrophy which had thus seized upon this young man, till then so promising. His condition was kept secret from the friends and acquaintances of the family for some months, in the hope that a restoration to health would be accomplished and thus render it unnecessary to excite alarm; but the disease made such rapid progress that Lord Marchmont lost all hope, for death appeared to be approaching with giant strides that might be seen.

The nobleman was thus doomed, in his old age, for he had married very late in life, to behold his son perishing before his eyes; and he now began to reflect that when the fatal moment should arrive and Arthur Eaton should be snatched away by the merciless grasp of the Destroying Angel, the long-neglected, long-discarded, almost forgotten Mr. Clarendon would become heir presumptive to the proud title and vast estates of Marchmont! Therefore, when this gentleman suddenly made his appearance at the castle, the old nobleman gave him the cordial though mournful welcome due to one who was in all probability destined to be his successor; and Mr. Clarendon then for the first time heard of the distressing state of his younger relative's health. Lord Marchmont spoke not of the past as it regarded his treatment of Mr. Clarendon; but he was liberal in his offers and proposals for the future. The result was that the father of Octavia and Pauline returned home with the certainty of an income of a thousand a year for the future, and with every prospect of full soon becoming the heir to a noble title and an immense fortune.

Such was the intelligence which Mr. Clarendon now communicated to his daughters, and which they heard with mingled joy and sorrow; for if, on the one hand, they were delighted at the altered prospects of their well-beloved father, they could not help experiencing a profound sympathy on behalf of their youthful cousin who was so sorely and painfully afflicted. And this feeling was the more admirable on their part, inasmuch as they had not only never seen either Lord Marchmont or the Honourable Arthur Eaton, but they had no very excellent reasons for being interested in a haughty family at whose hands their sire had suffered so much chilling neglect.

Mr. Clarendon now began to unfold to them the views which he had conceived relative to their future mode of life. He proposed forthwith to take a house in a fashionable neighbourhood, and court that society in which the improved state of his circumstances would henceforth enable himself and his daughters to move. Octavia and Pauline were both delighted at the prospects thus developed to their contemplation; for the same thought instantly struck them both, namely, that their sudden elevation in the social sphere would render them more worthy of the suitors who had already appeared for their hands.

A considerable portion of the morning was taken up in these explanations and discussions; and when there was at last a pause in the conversation, Octavia and Pauline began to inform their father of the adventure which had occurred in respect to Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Mordaunt. They told him how the carriage had broken down in the road, how they offered the hospitality of the villa to the two ladies travelling in the vehicle, how Mrs. Mordaunt became a mother during the night, how the infant boy was entrusted in a mysterious manner to Mr. Thurston, the surgeon, and how Mrs. Smith had insisted upon presenting them (Octavia and Pauline) with valuable presents in return for their kindness.

Mr. Clarendon listened with profound attention to the extraordinary narrative; and when it was concluded, he praised his daughters for having so promptly offered the ladies an asylum, but regretted that they should have accepted the jewelry. On this point he, however, touched lightly enough; for his own altered circumstances had put him into too good a humour and had elevated his spirits too highly to allow him to be very serious in his remonstrances. In respect to the adventure itself, he coincided with the opinion which Octavia and Pauline had already formed, to the effect that the ladies were most probably of rank, and that the names of Smith and Mordaunt were assumed. But with regard to the terms on which Mr. Thurston had consented to take charge of the child, and the payment of the large sum of ten thousand pounds, Mr. Clarendon still remained ignorant, inasmuch as his daughters themselves were unacquainted with these arrangements.

Relative to Mr. Harley not a word was said; and we need scarcely observe that an equal silence was observed in reference to the visit of Lord Florimel. For these were secrets which the young ladies had obvious reasons for cherishing.

CHAPTER XXV

A NIGHT OF TERRORS

It was evening — half-past nine on the second evening of Caroline Walters's residence in the house of Mrs. Lindley, the midwife.

The young girl was seated alone in her chamber, listening to the hurricane that raged without; for the gale blew in terrific blasts, now rushing over the turbid Thames as if with a violence and a power sufficient to hurl down the very bridges themselves, then sweeping along the narrow street, and apparently enveloping that particular house with all its whirlwind might, now lulling for a short interval into a dreary succession of moaning sounds, and then, again collecting its appalling energies for a renewal of its tempestuous fury.

The chamber allotted to the young girl was on the second floor, and at the back of the house. Its windows therefore looked upon the Thames; but as the river, even at full tide, was much lower than the street, that casement was a considerable height above the water.

And it was full tide now, and, as she sat in her room, Caroline could hear, during each occasional lull of the windstorm, the plash of the rapid current against the piles which served as buttresses to the foundations of the dwelling. Those sounds, so ominous and drear, struck terror to her heart; for they seemed mingled with the moans of drowning men, — and the thought that a watery grave lay ready there, beneath the very window, was suggestive of horrible ideas of suicide as a relief to this world's care and suffering. Yes, it was but a step, a single step, that lay between the unhappy girl and the waters of oblivion; and yet she dared not take it — Oh, no — no!

Nevertheless, who at that moment was so wretched as Caroline? All the circumstances of her past life and her present position were present to her memory with the vividness of stationary lightning — if such a phenomenon could possibly have existence. She was an orphan, and she retained the fondest recollections of dear and loving parents, now no more. She had been left to the care of Mrs. Brace, whom she had looked upon as her only friend, and who, while affecting to perform a mother's part, had thrown the unprotected girl in the way of the systematic seducer. Him she had loved — madly, fervently loved; and in his presence her looks had beamed with a radiance more divine and a brilliance more warm than the scorching rays of that land to which her mother had belonged and where she herself first saw the light. For Spanish blood flowed in her veins, and imparted a higher glow to her transparent brunette complexion than characterizes English beauty. But when she had surrendered the only earthly treasure which she possessed — her virtue — to him who had won her young heart's best and purest affections, she soon — oh, too soon — perceived that it was not love which she had read in his impassioned looks, but a gross sensuality that when appeased left him comparatively cold and distant. For some time did she close her eyes as well as she was able to this sickening, desolating truth; and when she found herself in a way to become a mother, she was fond, and confiding, and sanguine enough to hope that he would fulfil all his promises, accomplish all his vows, and give a father's honourable name to the child that was in due time to be ushered into the world. He did not spurn her, he did not even disdain her prayer, it is true; but he replied in a manner that left her only to persist in hoping on even against the destruction of hope itself. Then came the necessity of her retirement to the midwife's abode; and here we now find her, alone in her chamber, in a solitude made more terrible by her own distracting thoughts.

O God! how often is it that woman is destined to pour out the divinest flood of her bosom's affections and her soul's sympathies into a heart which is hollow, vacant, and unfilled to the last! how often does woman — beautiful, adorable woman — perish miserably through the vileness of that man's heart which is thus unworthy to receive that torrent of holiest devotion, that full tide of purest love! And how often it is, great heaven! that not only does one woman pine and die for such a heart, but that a hundred living, bursting female hearts are doomed to perish wretchedly, wretchedly, for the infamy of one man!

But if Caroline Walters could no longer live for love, yet she might still live on for vengeance. A great change had come over the young girl during the twenty-four hours which she had now passed beneath the midwife's roof. She no longer attempted to veil from her sight the misery of her position. Lost, betrayed, abandoned by him whom she had adored, the full measure of his deceit and treachery developed itself, in all its black details, to her appalled understanding. Then came jealousy, too, running like the bursting of a pent-up torrent through every avenue of her soul, and she felt assured that she had been deserted for some other fair one! Her Spanish blood boiled like a lava-stream in her veins; and a thirst for vengeance, acquiring all the intensity of a ferocious passion, penetrated like a consuming flame into the very depths of the young girl's being.

The dark nature of her thoughts scared her, as she thus sat ruminating in her lonely chamber. The ideas upon which her bewildered mind settled itself — ideas urging her Spanish nature to revenge — appeared to be a crime. But the longer she studied them, the more she dwelt upon them, the less startling did they become. And then arose new sources of terror in the influence which the raging windstorm without and the plashing of the turbid waters below exercised upon her soul; and lastly came those thoughts of suicide, which convulsed her entire frame with ineffable horror.

But, no — no: she must live for vengeance!

Rising from her seat, and casting a hurried glance around the chamber, — which was small, but neatly furnished, though gloomy in its aspect, — she felt that she must do something to occupy her mind. She knew that she could not sleep even if she retired to her couch; and her utter loneliness, alike of position and of mind, began to have an influence over her which was intolerable.

What if she were to seek an hour's companionship with one of the four young females to whom she had been introduced, and with whom she had passed the greater portion of the day? They were kind and compassionate toward her; for they were in a condition even to afford consolation, inasmuch as they did not feel their own degraded state as deeply and as severely as Caroline felt hers.

Yes, she would stealthily seek the chamber of some one of those young women; for every instant was the awful sense of solitude becoming more difficult to endure.

Taking the candle in her hand, she stole noiselessly forth from her room; but when she found herself in the large landing outside, and beheld three or four doors besides her own opening thence, she knew not at which to knock.

After hesitating for a few moments, she blamed herself for her irresolution; and, tapping gently at the door of the chamber precisely opposite, waited for the answer. None reached her ear, and, growing positively terrified by the deep silence which reigned throughout the house and which had in it something mysteriously awful at the time when the wind was roaring in such terrific gusts without, she opened the door. A glance into the room convinced her that it was not a sleeping-chamber; nevertheless, an unaccountable feeling of curiosity prompted her to enter. She crossed the threshold and advanced, holding the candle high up so as to obtain a complete view of the place.

It was a lumber-room, where broken furniture and articles not in use were stowed away; and it had that peculiar disagreeable, earthy smell which invariably prevails in apartments constantly shut up, and where old wooden things are mouldering with the process of decay. To the walls were suspended bunches of herbs of various kinds, hung there to dry; and amongst them was a considerable quantity of savin, the detestable use of which, in such hands as those of Mrs. Lindley, was to produce abortion. But of this fact Caroline Walters was happily ignorant; otherwise, it would only have increased the sentiment of aversion which she already experienced with regard to the midwife.

Nevertheless, if the sight of those herbs produced no unpleasant effect upon the young girl, she was speedily horrified and startled by other spectacles which this room presented. For, ranged upon a shelf stood several glass jars, each containing the diminutive corpse of an infant preserved in spirits of wine. Yielding to an invincible impulse of curiosity, but with a cold tremor of the frame, Caroline advanced to scan these objects nearer; and, as she gazed with mingled loathing and fearful interest, she discovered something connected with each tiny body that enhanced the poignancy of those feelings. For they were monsters — human monsters — which were preserved in those bottles, and on which the eyes of the young girl were thus fixed!

That those infants had died at their birth, was probable; that some, if not all, had been murdered, either by stifling or poison, was not very unlikely, — but this latter idea did not for a moment strike Caroline Walters. All her thoughts were absorbed in the loathsome monstrosities which she was contemplating. For in one jar was an infant with an enormous protuberance, having the appearance of an immense wen, upon one side of its little head; another contained a child of hideous features and without any arms; a third displayed the horrid spectacle of twin bodies with one head, — the revolting production of nature thus having four arms and four legs; and a fourth vase contained an infant corpse that had neither arms nor legs at all. In fine, these specimens of the terrible eccentricities which occasionally come within the cognizance of those who practise midwifery were amongst the most revolting which the annals of the art have ever recorded.

Turning away at length from the disgusting exhibition, and with such a sickening sensation at the heart that she was forced to place the candlestick upon a table for fear she should drop it and be left in the dark amidst those horrors, Caroline leaned against the wall for support. While thus sustaining herself, and wondering what sentiment of curiosity could have originally prompted her to enter the room at all, she cast her eyes around as if fearful lest some terrific spectre should suddenly rise from amidst the pile of lumber or appear upon the threshold of the door, when her looks settled upon a tall black wooden case, standing upright against the wall.

Again she shuddered with a cold trembling from head to foot; for this box at first struck her as being a coffin that was planted there! But a second and more searching glance showed her that it had not that angular projection of the sides which marks the sinister shape of the receptacle for the dead.

And now that same mysterious and invincible curiosity which had already influenced her on this eventful evening once more impelled her to approach the object of her attention; and observing that the case had a door hung on hinges and fastened by means of a small latch, she was prompted to open it.

The door swung back; but no pen can describe the terror which seized upon the young woman when the bleached bones of a skeleton were suddenly revealed to her view.

The consternation which fell upon her stifled the cry that rose to her lips; and for nearly a minute she was held, as it were, motionless, petrified, statue-like, and yet with her very flesh creeping. Horror seized upon her brain. The effect was as if the Medusa's head had thus abruptly met her eyes, turning her to stone. While this appalling influence lasted, by no human effort could she have averted her gaze from the anatomy; a supernal power appeared to rivet her looks on the whitened skeleton!

And that skeleton! It appeared to be standing upright in its case, for it was fastened by the head to the top thereof; its long fingers were slightly bent, its toes pointed downward. It seemed to grin horribly with its two rows of white and perfect teeth, and Caroline thought that with its eyeless sockets it looked with a stony and deathlike gaze upon her.

At the same moment that this appalling spectacle was displayed to her view, — appalling we say, considering her state of mind, — the wind came roaring, rushing, and bellowing down upon the house with such fury that it shook to its very foundation; and for an instant the thought flashed to the girl's imagination that the day of judgment was at hand.

A draught swept through the chamber in spite of the well-closed windows with their shutters inside and their large wooden shades without, — for this room looked into the street, — and, agitated by that piercing, penetrating gust, the herbs rustled against the wall like the garments of some being approaching the young woman from behind, and the bones rattled slightly in the upright box.

A vertigo seized upon the unfortunate Caroline; and, staggering back, — but uttering no cry, for her lips were sealed by the feeling that was now passing over her, — she sank on a chair that happened to stand near. Wildly she cast her eyes around. Objects of terror, conjured up by her excited imagination, met them on every side; and she felt as if she were about to go raving mad, when a bell was suddenly rung with violence in the house.

Caroline started from her seat; and all the apparitions which her fancy had depicted vanished in an instant. The thought flashed to her that some one was up and stirring in the dwelling; and the sensation of utter loneliness abandoned her. It seemed as if something like life and animation had awakened beneath that roof. The certainty sprang up in her mind that should she call out for assistance, succour would come; and it was even with a courageous feeling that she closed the door of the skeleton's case.

Scarcely had she done this, when the bell was rung furiously a second time; and Miss Walters hurried back to her own chamber.

Shutting the door as noiselessly as possible, she placed the candle upon the mantelpiece, and seated herself to listen; for she knew that the summons came from one of the chambers tenanted by the midwife's lodgers. Then the thought struck her that Mrs. Lindley, who slept in a room below, would be hurrying up-stairs to answer that bell, and it was probable that she would see the light in Caroline's chamber gleaming through the keyhole. The young girl, now no longer afraid, thereupon extinguished the candle; and, approaching the door, she held her breath to listen.

Almost immediately afterward, some one came hurrying up the staircase; and Caroline knew by her step, hasty though it were, that it was Mrs. Lindley. The midwife passed by the young woman's door, but stopped short at the next on the right hand; and Caroline heard her enter the adjoining apartment.

That was the chamber occupied by the lady concerning whom the utmost precaution and secrecy were requisite, — the young lady of high birth, who never quitted her room.

The wind had experienced some degree of abatement in its violence, and its gusts were less frequent than during the earlier part of the evening. But still it gushed along the bosom of the Thames and swept at intervals over the house; and soon those sounds without were mingled with moans of female anguish within. Trembling from head to foot with new and undefined alarms, and experiencing a boundless sympathy for the young lady whom she supposed to be in the agonies of maternity, but whom to her knowledge she had never seen, Caroline Walters began to feel her Spanish blood boiling with the excitement of an intense loathing in regard to that house of terrible mystery whither shame repaired to hide its head, where children were born Heaven only knew how to be disposed of, and where a vile woman throve upon the dark and sinister practice which, as she herself had boasted to Mrs. Brace, never left her chambers untenanted.

For nearly half an hour did the moans, varied by occasional subdued screams, continue in the next room; and all that time Miss Walters remained still and motionless in her own chamber, but with a fearful excitement rapidly increasing upon her. At length, so heated grew her brain, that she felt she must either have fresh air or be suffocated. The room seemed to have become a coffin; the atmosphere was to her senses as sultry as the torrid glow of the tropics. Nevertheless, it was — as the reader remembers — in the depth of winter; and the blast was blowing without as if it had come laden with the ice-chill of far-off Labrador.

Approaching the window, Caroline opened it as noiselessly as she could; and the cutting wind's intensity of cold was lost upon her. It seemed but a gentle breeze that fanned her feverish cheeks and blew back the hair from her countenance.

Dark as pitch was the night without; black as a funereal pall did that darkness seem to hang upon the river and against the house. Not a star peeped forth from above, not even an outline of the tempestuous clouds that were piled one upon another could be seen; for it was the very air itself that seemed to be a flood of jet but impalpable ink. The young girl could hear the rush of the river and its constant plashings against the piles below; but there was not a gleam upon its surface, not a mitigated shade to show that it was water running there. All was black, densely, profoundly black, like the interior of a vast cavern whither the light of day penetrated not, and where no lamp illumed the scene.

Yes, it was a night which crime would revel in for its own vile purposes, a night from which conscience would shrink appalled, when remorse was present, a night that would make the rich rejoice in the possession of their warm rooms and their downy beds, and which at the same time would impel the poor to curse the existence that was doomed to be dragged on in those cold and cheerless garrets where not even a mattress protected the shivering limbs from the hard floor.

For upwards of five minutes had Caroline Walters stood at the window, courting, as it were, the nipping chill of the wind to cool her brain, which seemed to be on fire, and her blood, which appeared to circulate like lightning in her veins, when, at the expiration of that brief interval, she heard a neighbouring window gently and slowly open.

Scarcely had this sound fallen upon her ear, when the conviction flashed to her mind that it was the casement of the adjacent room — the young lady's chamber — which was thus opening, and while she was still listening with breathless attention, the faint, feeble, and half-stifled cry of a new-born child was wafted to her through the air.

In the next moment that cry was heard the least thing louder, and immediately afterward it rose into a small shrill shriek; then there was a plash in the waters beneath, a sound distinct from the ripplings against the piles, and which seemed as if something had been thrown into the river, and at the same instant the window of the next room was shut down.

If a scorpion had suddenly twined itself about the neck of Caroline Walters, a more horrible feeling could not have come over her than the sensation which now seized upon her brain, her heart, her entire being. For to her startled soul rushed the appalling conviction that a foul and atrocious murder had just been perpetrated, — the murder of a babe whose eyes had scarcely opened in this world ere they were closed again in the night of death, and that death inflicted, perhaps — nay, most probably — with the cognizance of the victim's own mother!

Staggering away from the window, the young woman fell upon her knees by the side of her bed; and, yielding to the deep agony of feelings so intensely wrung, she buried her face in her hands and endeavoured to pray. But her thoughts grew bewildered, her ideas became confused, and a frightful consternation seized upon her. Rising slowly, she mechanically closed the window, and began to lay aside her clothing; and, had the candle been still burning and she could have caught a glimpse of her features in the mirror, she would have shrunk back in dismay from the reflection of the ghastly pallor of her countenance, the strange, unnatural vacancy of her eyes, and the ashy whiteness of her quivering lips.

But it was dark now within that chamber, dark as the air without, dark, too, as the deed which characterized this night of terror.

Caroline Walters sought her couch, and sleep soon fell upon her eyes; for she was worn out and exhausted with the overwhelming fatigues which the body had sustained from the mind's incessant workings and convulsive agitations during the last hour. But though slumber thus sealed her heavy lids, yet to her bosom there came no rest; for even in her dreams was she pursued by the horrors that had appalled her soul ere she lay down to repose.

Yes, and even in her visions, too, it seemed as if an oath of vengeance sprang from her very heart's core, — of vengeance against him who had seduced and betrayed her, and against that old demoness in female shape who had perpetrated the tremendous tragedy of this foul night.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PRINCE, TIM MEAGLES, AND LADY LETITIA LADE

WHILE the scenes just related were taking place at the abode of Mrs. Lindley, in Fore Street, Lambeth, a conversation replete with interest in regard to our tale was progressing at Carlton House.

It was about ten o'clock on that night of tempest and of crime, when the Prince of Wales, having quitted the dinner-table in another apartment of his magnificent dwelling, retired to his private chamber, which we have already described in a preceding chapter. Germain, his faithful French valet, was waiting there for any further instructions which his royal master might have to give; but the prince, having satisfied himself with a glance at the table that everything requisite had been provided, dismissed his dependent with orders to serve up supper at midnight.

Germain bowed and withdrew; and when he had disappeared, the prince locked the door by which the man had retired, and immediately afterward unfastened the one leading to the private staircase. Having done this, the prince approached the table, which was spread with a varied assortment of delicious wines, preserved and hothouse fruits, and cakes of several descriptions; and filling a large glass with claret, he tossed off the contents. Then, throwing himself into an easy chair, the prince began to hum a tune, in the midst of which occupation he was interrupted by the approach of footsteps on the private stairs.

In a few moments Tim Meagles made his appearance, ushering in the Amazon, as on the previous occasion when we introduced him to the prince's bedchamber.

The lady was attired in the same manner as we then described; but, if possible, she was still handsomer, for the cold wind had so heightened the naturally healthy hues of her complexion that she seemed radiant with animation. Nevertheless, his Royal Highness could not restrain a movement of impatience when he observed that his friend Meagles had brought her thither again; but the volatile Tim, hastening forward, whispered in the prince's ear, "I know what you want to see me for, — and Lady Letitia can help you."

The countenance of George brightened up immediately; and, rising from his seat, he gave the Amazon a cordial welcome.

Throwing aside her hat and riding-whip, and taking a chair, Lady Letitia Lade smoothed down her glossy black hair and arranged her luxuriant ringlets, exclaiming, "This wind plays the very devil with one's curls. I really think I shall have them cut off altogether."

"It were the veriest sacrilege perpetrated against nature's shrine of loveliness that a vandal imagination could possibly conceive," observed the prince, smiling.

"Egad! that's the prettiest turned compliment I ever heard fall from your lips, my dear prince," said Meagles; "but I perfectly agree with you in the opinion which it implies."

"Hold your tongue, Tim!" cried the Amazon, laughing so as to display thirty-two of the whitest teeth, which were all perfect as to number, and without a speck or blemish; so that no one could complain of the somewhat large mouth which thus revealed the brilliant array. "With the permission of your Royal Highness, I shall help myself," continued Lady Letitia; "for, in spite of your cheerful fire, the flames of which go roaring up the chimney like a broken-winded horse pressed into a gallop, I still feel cold, and a glass of your excellent Madeira will warm me."

"This is Liberty Hall, my dear huntress," said the prince; "and therefore I shall not even adopt the ceremonious courtesy of filling your glass for you."

"By Jove! she can fill it for herself — and empty it, too," cried Tim Meagles, an observation which gained him a smart box on the ear from Lady Letitia.

"Do you treat Sir John in that fashion?" demanded the prince, laughing.

" Poor old gentleman! he is well-nigh in his dotage," said the Amazon. " He lets me do just as I like — "

" And if he didn't, you'd do it, all the same," remarked Tim.

" Most assuredly," responded the huntress. " But as he is indulgent and good, we never have any quarrels. He only sees with my eyes and hears with my ears; and thus we live happily enough together."

" You are particularly fortunate," observed the prince. " but we must now proceed to business, Meagles. We have two clear hours before us to chat, and supper will be served at twelve."

" I can guess what you require," said Tim; " but I suppose your wants are not very pressing, or else you would not have sent up a note to my lodgings last evening, postponing our appointment until to-night."

" The fact is, that four and twenty hours made no material difference, as affairs stood," rejoined the Prince of Wales; " but as they now stand, another four and twenty hours must not be allowed to pass away without seeing my coffers replenished."

" What is the matter, then? " demanded Meagles. " Anything particularly pressing? "

" That poor devil Foster, who lent me the fifteen thousand pounds, you know, — upon my simple note of hand, — three years ago — " began the Prince of Wales, speaking hurriedly.

" Why, I thought your Royal Highness had settled it last Christmas twelvemonth," interrupted Meagles. " Did I not make an arrangement with him for you? And did I not even find you the money to hand over to him? He agreed to receive the principal, and waive all claim to the twenty-five per cent. interest."

" It is perfectly true, my dear Meagles," resumed George, as he sipped his wine, " that you did everything you have just stated; but it is equally true that the money which you procured for me on that occasion went into some other channel."

" And yet you never mentioned that circumstance to me until now," observed Tim, somewhat reproachfully. " How can I possibly undertake to settle these kinds of things for your Royal Highness, when you constantly act in a different manner from what I suggest or arrange, and then leave me completely in the dark?"

"I do not consider that you have a right to catechize me thus, Mr. Meagles," said the prince, haughtily. "If it be irksome or unpleasant to you to attend occasionally to my business —"

"Irksome and unpleasant be hanged!" exclaimed Tim. "What I meant was, that your Royal Highness places me in such a position at times that I should look like a fool were I, for instance, to meet this man Foster —"

"The fact is," interrupted Lady Letitia, "Tim Meagles is anxious never to look otherwise than like a sapient fellow, as he is."

"A thousand thanks, my dear huntress, for taking my part!" exclaimed the prince, now thinking it politic to resume his good humour. "Come, Meagles, give me your best attention, and let us see what can be done in this difficulty."

"We shall be sure to overcome it," remarked Tim, quite satisfied with the little amount of independent spirit which he had just shown, and which was only displayed for the purpose of disarming Lady Letitia of any suspicion that she might have formed to the effect that he was nothing more than the prince's servile toad-eater and did not dare to call his soul his own. "Pray proceed, my illustrious friend; I am all attention."

"Well, you must know that this unfortunate fellow Foster is on the very verge of bankruptcy, — that's what I think they call it amongst trading people," continued his Royal Highness, with a supercilious smile of contempt for that mighty industrious class upon whose hard earnings and incessant toils the unprincipled voluptuary was living in a luxurious indolence and an execrable dissipation. "It appears," proceeded the prince, "that Foster has met with sad reverses, and that unless he can pay a sum of between fourteen and fifteen thousand pounds by three o'clock to-morrow, he will be irremediably ruined. Now, the fact is that the other evening I agreed to meet him at the very tavern where three years ago he lent me the cash; for you know that I have a desperate aversion to any of those tradesmen fellows setting foot within these walls."

" And very proper, too," remarked the Amazon, totally unmindful of the little circumstance that she was born of parents who were beggars, and in a miserable garret in Lukner's Lane, St. Giles's.

" Well," resumed the prince, " I went to the place of appointment — it was the George and Blue Boar, Holborn; and on arriving there, I ordered the landlord, who immediately recognized me, to show me to a private room. Conceive my annoyance when I learned that there was not an apartment unoccupied throughout the establishment; the entire building was full of guests. Even the landlord's own parlour was engaged for a supper-party. There was no help for it, and I was compelled to repair to the commercial room, having previously informed the landlord that if any one called to inquire for a Mr. Jenkins, the individual was to be conducted straight to me. I had not been long seated in the travellers' room, as they call it, when I observed, as I was sipping my rum punch, that an insolent rascal of a bagman was surveying me in a very peculiar fashion; and he presently had the impertinence to intimate that he was not unaware who I was. Vainly did I endeavour to rebuke him by reminding him that the mere fact of my being there at all was a sufficient indication of my desire to escape vulgar notice. The scoundrel was unabashed, and boldly declared that my words had confirmed his suspicion relative to my identity. Indignant and disgusted, repenting, too, of my folly in going thither under any circumstances whatsoever, and observing by the clock that it was considerably past the hour when Foster was to meet me, I quitted the tavern abruptly; but, knowing how absolutely necessary it was to make immediate arrangements with that same Foster, in order to prevent him from calling and dunning at Carlton House, I resolved to proceed to his own private residence. I accordingly took a hackney-coach in Holborn; but when some distance up the Edgeware Road, in which neighbourhood Foster dwells, I became aware that I was pursued. Instantly suspecting some freak arising from the impertinence of the bagman, and fearing lest a disturbance might ensue and obtain publicity, thereby causing unpleasant mention to be made of my name, I alighted, dismissed the coach, and took refuge in the nearest house."

" A very unpleasant little adventure," observed Lady Letitia, laughing heartily.

" I only wish that I had been with your Royal Highness," said Tim Meagles. " That same insolent bagman should not have escaped with a whole skin. But the end of it was, I suppose, that you failed to see Foster altogether? "

" Precisely so," answered the prince. " And now, to make a long story short, I have received a letter from Foster, respectfully apologizing for being too late to meet me the other night at the tavern, but assuring me that he is a ruined man unless he can pay a certain mercantile firm in Wood Street the sum of fourteen thousand five hundred pounds by three o'clock to-morrow. Now, can anything be done, Tim? " inquired the prince, anxiously; " for I pledge you my royal honour that I know not whence to procure half the amount. My name is already talked about in so scandalous a manner, my immense liabilities are as notorious as they well can be, and my position, in fact, is so extremely disagreeable at this moment, that I would make any sacrifice to be enabled to settle this Foster's claim. Only conceive, my dear friends," added the prince, looking first at Meagles and then at the Amazon, — " only conceive what a terrible exposure it would be if Foster was to become bankrupt, and in his vexation should proclaim me as the cause of his failure! "

" Can your friend manage it in time, Letitia? " asked Meagles, turning toward the huntress.

" As early to-morrow as his Royal Highness may choose to appoint," was the lady's reply.

" The fact is this," resumed Tim, addressing himself to the prince: " our Amazonian beauty here has captivated a French marquis — "

" No scandal, Meagles! " interrupted the huntress. " The Marquis de Saint Croix is a friend of Sir John's, and in that capacity he has visited at our house. He is one of those noble refugees who have been compelled to seek an asylum in England, to avoid the guillotine in their own country."

" Perdition seize those miscreants of French Republicans! " ejaculated the Prince of Wales, suddenly becoming much excited. " Their pestilential doctrines are making vast progress here; but thank God! we possess generals who will not hesitate to cannonade the people at the first symptom of a rising. Nevertheless, royalty has begun to fall to a discount — "

" Your Royal Highness is wrong to suppose that such is the case in England," observed Meagles. " The aristocracy has got such a tight hold upon the millions that a convulsion here is impossible."

" Well, at all events, the throne will last my time out," observed the prince; " and I don't care one damn what follows! "

" Oh, leave politics alone for the present," exclaimed Lady Letitia; " and let us return to the matter whence you have both disgressed. The Marquis de Saint Croix, of whom I was speaking, is an old nobleman of very venerable appearance; and he has quite won Sir John's heart. The consequence is that he is a frequent visitor at our house, as I just now observed; and a few days ago he was saying that he had succeeded in bringing away with him, from his native land, a sum of not less than twenty thousand pounds. He is anxious to lay out his money to the best advantage, and consulted my husband upon the subject. Sir John replied that he would mention the business to his solicitor, who might probably know where to place the amount on some safe mortgage, and at good interest. I happened to mention this circumstance to our friend Meagles — "

" And I immediately suggested that perhaps your Royal Highness would like to take up the sum," added Tim. " Letitia says that she can manage it easily, and without delay."

" And what security can I possibly give the marquis? " inquired George.

" Your Royal Highness's bond will doubtless be sufficient," answered Meagles.

" And the French nobleman will rejoice in having deposited his money in such good hands," observed the Amazon. " He will consider the transaction as a guarantee for the continuation of that hospitality and protection which England has already vouchsafed, not only to himself, but to so many thousands of his refugee fellow countrymen."

" But the affair must be managed with the utmost secrecy," said the prince. "How can you even prevent your husband, Sir John Lade, from knowing it?"

"Leave that to me," returned the Amazon. "If your Royal Highness shall think fit to embrace the proposal, I will undertake to bring the Marquis de Saint Croix hither to-morrow, at any specified hour. A bond can be already prepared, blanks being left for the names of lender and borrower and the amount to be thus advanced, and all can be settled in a few minutes."

"I cannot possibly refuse so excellent an offer, my dear huntress," answered the prince. "We will say at one o'clock to-morrow; there will, then, be plenty of time to forward the fifteen thousand pounds to Foster, as he is not compelled to make his payment before three."

This matter being so far settled to the satisfaction of his Royal Highness, the conversation turned upon other topics, and the wine circulated freely, — Lady Letitia by no means sparing the light vintage of France.

At midnight the prince desired Tim Meagles to unlock the door communicating with the anteroom; and Germain almost immediately made his appearance, followed by two footmen bearing the supper-trays.

When the table was spread, and the two subordinate lackeys had retired, Germain said to the prince, "May it please your Royal Highness, a very obtrusive person called about an hour ago, and insisted upon obtaining an interview with your Royal Highness."

"Did he give his name?" demanded the prince, his countenance flushing with indignation.

"He announced himself as a Mr. Foster," was the reply. "But knowing that your Royal Highness was engaged, I would not on any account permit him to enter farther than the hall."

"Did the porters overhear anything that he said, Germain?" inquired George.

"It was in consequence of a species of altercation which took place between him and them, that I was summoned to the hall, may it please your Royal Highness."

"And what — what did the insolent fellow dare to say in the hearing of my menials?" demanded the prince, now stammering with the excitement and irritability that were gaining upon him.

"Nothing more than that it would be ruin to him unless he either obtained an audience or received an answer to a letter which he had addressed a day or two ago to your Royal Highness," responded Germain, who throughout this colloquy had spoken in the subdued tone of the profoundest respect, and as if he were only relating a very ordinary and commonplace occurrence, instead of something so exceedingly derogatory to his master.

"That will do," said the prince; "you may retire. My dear friends," he continued, as soon as the valet had withdrawn, "you perceive how these insolent City people dun you to death if you happen to put them to any little trifling inconvenience. But, thanks to your project, my sweet huntress, Tim Meagles will be enabled to take Foster his money to-morrow, and I shall be freed from all alarm on the part of this pestering trader. So we will think no more about him for the present, but only study how to enjoy ourselves for the next two or three hours to come."

CHAPTER XXVII

TOO LATE

"ANY little trifling inconvenience!" — these were the words that the Prince of Wales applied to the ruinous embarrassments into which he himself had been the means of plunging a highly respectable merchant of the City of London.

And it is always with similar levity that the aristocracy speak of the applications made to them by their tradesmen for money, no matter how long it may have been owing. In their estimation they confer an honour upon the shopkeepers with whom they deal; and therefore the vile plebeians must await their patrician convenience. What! dare to ask for payment of a bill, or even a small sum on account? Who ever heard of such insolence? Withdraw your custom immediately, ye proud ones, from such unmannerly fellows! What is it to you if such timely liquidation would rescue an industrious, hard-working man from bankruptcy and his children from the workhouse? What is it to you if even the regular payments of your bills would save honest traders from the most cruel embarrassments? What is it to you if the whole community of artisans, mechanics, and operatives be doomed to suffer, throughout its various ramifications and in all its manifold sections, in consequence of your want of punctuality? Nothing, nothing; you care not a straw for the miseries which ye thus entail upon the world of industry!

Show us a class of persons, on the face of God Almighty's earth, more thoroughly heartless than the English aristocracy. No — you cannot! There exists not an oligarchy in the world so devoid of proper feelings as that which comprises the nobility and the fashion of this realm. Talk of the donations which they make to charitable institutions — it is a despicable farce! They only give where they know their names will be proclaimed by canting saints at Exeter Hall, or published in the columns of the daily newspapers. And even if they were really charitable and truly bounteous, even if they gave largely to the deserving poor, and dispensed gold by handfuls in secret benevolence, they would only be rendering back to the people a portion of that inordinate wealth which they derive from the thews, sinews, fibres, vitals, and heart's blood of the toiling, wretched, starving millions!

" Any little trifling inconvenience! " — and yet thousands of respectable tradesmen have been ruined by the disgraceful delays of their aristocratic customers and patrons in liquidating their accounts. How much misery has the Duke of York caused in this manner? And yet a column is erected to his memory! Is it not a column of infamy?

While the Prince of Wales was uttering those words, " any little trifling inconvenience," a wretched, broken-hearted, despairing man was returning to his home in the Edgeware Road. Home! how often had that delightful name cheered John Foster's spirits as he breathed it to himself while toiling at his desk in the City! How often had the thought of that home inspired him with energy and courage to pass through the laborious routine of the day, by holding forth the delightful assurance that happy faces and a social hearth would await his return to his own abode in the evening!

But now, now, as he was wending his way back to that dwelling, he felt that it could no longer be called his home. For a home means something stationary, fixed, and permanent, not precarious and liable to be snatched away in a moment; a place of one's own choosing, and to which there is a certainty of returning to-morrow and next day, even as one returns to it to-day; a tenement around whose walls the eye may glance with the satisfaction of knowing that everything contained within their boundary is one's own. Whether it be a single apartment, or a lordly mansion, it is nevertheless a home so long as the conviction lasts that no man can deprive you of it, no one thrust you forth at will, no rude hand lay its gripe upon the beds, the chairs, and the tables which it contains.

Therefore was it that, as the wretched John Foster retraced his way to the house in which he had dwelt for so many years, he no longer considered it to be his home. No, ruin was imminent, — total, irremediable, unmitigated ruin; and bankruptcy would sweep away his furniture, bankruptcy would sell the lease of his house, and bankruptcy would turn him, his wife, and his daughter into the streets!

Wretched, wretched man! how had he deserved this hard fate? From his youth upward had he toiled unweariedly, first to make his way in the world, next to maintain the position he had achieved for himself, then to improve it, and lastly to sustain it against the difficulties which sprang up, through various causes, around him. Beginning life with nothing, he had succeeded at the age of thirty in exchanging the servitude of a clerkship for the independence of a master; at forty he married a woman who brought him a tolerable sum of money; at fifty he was rising to opulence, at fifty-five he was enabled to lend the Prince of Wales fifteen thousand pounds, being all the money he had succeeded in putting by during his life of industry, and at fifty-eight, the failure of several eminent houses had so embarrassed his own resources that he was trembling on the verge of bankruptcy.

Messrs. Hodson and Morley, of Wood Street, Cheapside, had threatened to strike a docket against him. Vainly had he besought more time — none was granted. A greedy lawyer, anxious for a job, was employed against him; and, as no character is more estimable than an honest attorney, so none is more execrable than a griping pettifogger. Foster's only resource lay in the money which the prince owed him. Were that repaid, he could settle the only pressing liability he had in the world; and thereby gaining time to collect his assets, which were far greater than his debts, he would continue to hold up his head as a prosperous merchant.

We have seen that he unfortunately missed his appointment with the prince at the George and Blue Boar. And yet we hardly know whether we be justified in using the term "unfortunately;" for his Royal Highness could not have paid him, had they met. Next we find him addressing a respectful letter to the prince, humbly imploring the restoration of his money: not appealing to the honesty, but to the humanity of his royal debtor; not confidently demanding his own, as a right, but servilely beseeching payment as a boon. For this is the manner in which princes must be addressed, and they are not letters which you write to them, but petitions!

But to that appeal no answer was returned. It was quite sufficient if his Royal Highness deigned to give the subject a thought. How could he be expected to trouble himself so far as to pen a reply? Driven almost to desperation, perceiving Ruin in his presence, with only the interval of a few short hours, and having his heart filled with a boundless sympathy for that wife who for eighteen years had been a true and faithful companion to him, and for that daughter of sixteen who was so beautiful and innocent, and whom he loved so fondly, the merchant had at length resolved to call at Carlton House. Thither he repaired; and, in a mild and respectful voice, solicited a few moments' audience of the prince. The hall porters judged that he was a dun, and met his civility with coarse and brutal insult. Still did John Foster preserve his temper, still did he forbear to utter anything disrespectful toward the prince; but he implored one of the insolent, powdered, and lace-bedizened menials to bear a message to his Royal Highness. The request was refused with a positive ruffianism of manner; and Foster, sinking upon one of the chairs in the marble hall, gave way to his grief. Then was it that Germain was sent for; and the merchant, addressing that valet with as much respect as if he were a great lord and Foster himself a grovelling beggar, earnestly besought either an instant's audience of the prince or an answer to a letter which he had previously forwarded. Germain declared that it was impossible to disturb his royal master at that hour; but he spoke in a respectful, almost kind tone. Then was it that Foster, driven to despair, exclaimed that he should be ruined unless one or the other of his requests was granted. Germain still refused to interfere, and the merchant dragged himself away from the princely dwelling, in a state of mind which it is scarcely possible to explain.

Oh, there are times when the brain reels with a sense of misery, misery, misery, from which no means of escape appear, and to which no relief can come, times when the soul is filled with an anguish beyond the limits of the imagination to conceive, and when every cord in the heart is so distended that it feels as if the whole must give way at once and the victim be stricken down in sudden death, as if by the thunderbolt of apoplexy!

Such were the sensations of the merchant as he mechanically pursued his way homeward. Though his dwelling was at some considerable distance, he thought not of taking a vehicle. A vehicle, indeed! What, when he could see Ruin staring at him with its spectral eyes, preceding him, with its ghastly countenance turned toward him, following him, walking on his right hand and on his left, hemming him in, as it were, with that terrible influence which made it appear of multiform shape! And as he threaded the crowded streets, walking on like a drunken man, unconscious which way he was pursuing, yet mechanically taking the direct route, he beheld not the people who jostled him, heard not the gibes which thoughtless young men threw at him, noticed not the frail girls who saluted him with obscene jests, marked not the carriages sweeping along the thoroughfares which he crossed. No, nothing did he see save the gaunt, spectral, and terrific form of Ruin; nothing did he hear but the silent voice which thundered through his brain the deafening word, " Ruined! "

It was midnight when he reached his house, which was only at a short distance from Paradise Villas. Lights gleamed from the parlour windows, and he knew that anxious hearts were beating within. For he had no secrets from his wife and daughter; they knew all — and now they were waiting to know the worst. But he paused on the steps for upwards of two minutes ere he could command the courage and the energy sufficient to raise his hand to the knocker. How could he meet them face to face, and say, " I am ruined "? How could he encounter their earnest, inquiring gaze, and proclaim that hope was gone? For, doubtless, they were hoping still; yes, and cheering each other, mother and daughter each striving and straining her utmost to sustain the spirits of the other. My God! how could he cast the blight of despair upon all those tender sympathies, those pious assurances, those holy consolations? Yet it must be done; sooner or later the blow would arrive, sooner or later must the storm of ruin level the castles which hope was building on the unstable sand that it mistook for a firm rock. Oh, unhappy, doomed family!

Foster knocked at the door, and immediately afterward his ear caught the rustling of dresses and the rapid tread of light feet in the hall within. The door was opened hastily, anxious voices welcomed him, and in the same breath inquired what news he had brought; and he remained standing motionless on the threshold, and spoke no word. For before him were his wife and daughter, the two beings whom he loved so well, and to save whose hearts a pang he would cheerfully lay down his existence, — ay, and smile in the midst of that self-martyrdom!

The light of the hall lamp fell upon his countenance, and they saw that it spoke terrible things. Then they knew the worst.

Now, had he entered in an excited manner and at once proclaimed the full extent of his misery, — which was also their misery, — they would doubtless have burst into a violent ebullition of grief. But when they saw that he, the husband and the father, was, as it were, stunned and stupefied by the immensity of the sorrow that weighed upon him, they instantly revealed themselves in the true nature of woman — blessed woman! — and became comforters and consolers.

"Dearest, dearest husband," murmured the wife, endeavouring to smile, "all may not be as bad as you apprehend."

"Beloved father," whispered the daughter, succeeding in her attempt to smile, but it was through glistening tears, "you have given me a good education, I possess accomplishments, and I can work to maintain us all."

Then the full tide of ineffable emotions rushed to the heart of the ruined merchant, who was so tenderly adjured by a wife and so affectionately addressed by a daughter; and, entering the house, he folded them both in his embrace, and wept over them plenteously. But such was the state of his mind that those tears gave him no real relief; they only forced his sorrow to take, as it were, a new phase, for, inasmuch as he had been stupefied and stunned by its weight before, he was now writhing with an anguish that penetrated into the lowest confines of his being. Even though smiles had expanded over him like sunlight, they would only have served to bring into stronger relief the desert-like desolation of that future on which those whom he loved so well were about to enter.

Mastering, however, his emotions as well as he was able, Foster described the failure of his visit to Carlton House. Then came from his wife's lips the tremulous, hesitating question whether Hodson and Morley would not accord him a further delay.

" No, not an hour, not a minute! " answered the merchant, almost distracted; and he dashed his open palm violently against his brow.

" My dearest husband," said Mrs. Foster, " there is One above who hears our words and watches our ways; and if it should please Him to rescue us from ruin, penury, and want, even at the last instant will succour and salvation come."

But the afflicted man shook his head despairingly; his sorrow was too great for the consolations of religion.

His daughter, a lovely girl of sixteen, and to whom her fond parents had given the sweet name of Rose, as if in her earliest infancy they foresaw the beauty into which the then delicate flower was destined to expand, — this charming creature, we say, now exerted all the influence of the tenderest endearments and all the power of language to solace her distressed father. But suddenly his countenance grew strange and fearful; then a wild laughter wavered upon his lips, and, springing from his seat, he began to toss his arms about and rave as if in the fever of a delirium.

His wife and daughter threw themselves on their knees before him, and besought him to be calm. This touching spectacle and still more earnest appeal produced an almost instantaneous effect upon him; the wild laughter and the indistinct ravings were speedily lost in profound sobbings and suffocating sighs, and these were in their turn subdued by copious weeping and quenched by floods of tears.

Considerably tranquillized, Mr. Foster at length suffered himself to be conducted to his chamber. Sleep fell upon him; but his misfortunes pursued him in his dreams, and he awoke at an early hour unrefreshed. He raised his heavy eyelids, and the first objects his languid looks encountered were his wife and daughter. They had not retired to rest all night; their patient, holy, and affectionate vigil had been wakefully kept.

Oh, who can estimate the devotion of woman? Who can define a limit to her generous sympathies? Unto what can we liken the boundless love of which her heart is susceptible? To the elastic air, which is capable of an expansion so vast that a cubic inch may dilate to a volume filling all space, infinite though it be! Yes, to the air, so falsely called empty, let us assimilate woman's love. For even as that same atmosphere is filled with the perfume of flowers a million times mingled, so is woman's love fraught with all those sentiments of the soul that are in themselves a delicious essence and a fragrant balm; again, as the air becomes the medium of wafting all the harmonies of nature to the ear, so is woman's love breathed in melodious tones, combining all the modulations of her tenderest sensibilities; and, lastly, even as the atmosphere is radiant with the lustre of the orb of day, so does woman's love diffuse its brightness from beaming eyes and in sunny smiles.

Oh, thou vile, ruthless ruffian that could raise thine hand against a woman! Oh, thou black-hearted wretch that could remain unmoved by the tears which thine own ill-treatment has provoked! Knowest thou not what woman's love is? It would prompt her to die for thee, to lay down her life to save thine or the lives of her children. She has her faults, her failings, and her caprices; but, O man, pardon them, pardon them, for they are as nothing in comparison with her devotion, her affection, and her tenderness. As a grain of mustard-seed is to the whole earth, so are woman's foibles to her love. But you will point out bad wives, profligate daughters and sisters, abandoned mothers? Alas! alas! it is true — too true; but ask thyself, O man, who made them thus? who reduced those wretched creatures to what they are? The reply, if truly given, recoils with a crushing weight of terrible accusation upon thyself. For 'tis thou who hast worked all that infernal mischief. Take the vilest of the vile, the most loathsome of the loathsome forms of vice whose features bear the vivid impress of dissipation and debauchery, and trace this lost one's history of crime back to that moment when virgin innocence was wrecked in guilty enjoyment, and thou wilt hear a tale of fervent love on her part and cruel deception on that of the seducer. Yes, 'tis thou, O man, who art the most ruthless enemy and the most unrelenting oppressor of that sex to proclaim whose wrongs we have more than once ventured to wield our pen, feeble and ineffectual though our championship may be!

But let us resume the thread of our narrative.

Foster, the ruined merchant, awoke unrefreshed from his slumbers; and when his eyes fell upon the pale and careworn countenances of those who were so dear to him, he endeavoured to smile his gratitude for the vigil which he saw they had been keeping. But, heavens! so full of vacancy and woe was his smile that it told too plainly of a mind fast fading with the heart that was breaking within! Both wife and daughter beheld that terrible indication of the mortal shock which he whom they adored had received; but they dared not look at each other, lest they should betray the agonizing fears that were now uppermost in their mind.

Mr. Foster rose, performed his toilet with a precision that was habitual, and therefore mechanical in the present instance, and descended to the breakfast-table. He endeavoured to appear tranquil and composed; but the tremendous efforts which he thus made to conceal all that he felt were only concentrating his emotions with a maddening effect. His wife and daughter implored him not to leave home that day; they dared not offer to accompany him into the City, and they could not suffer him to repair thither alone. With a ghastly look, he murmured an assent to their prayer, adding, in a low and hollow tone, "It would be useless even if I were to go."

The morning wore away — Heaven knows how! We cannot pause to conjecture all the feelings and emotions experienced during the few hours which followed the ceremony of sitting down to a breakfast that was removed almost untasted. To attempt such a description would be to undertake the task of showing how human beings can live whole ages of pain and anguish in as many minutes; it would be to depict each throb of a pulse violent with the agitation of delirium, to note each tremor which passed through veins wherein lightning seemed to circulate, and to describe all the spectral shadows which rested upon souls goaded to despair.

As three o'clock in the afternoon drew nigh, Mr. Foster's excitement became intolerable. He first began to pace the room with uneven steps, as if his brain were swimming round; then he wandered about the house like a restless spirit. His sorrowing wife and the equally afflicted Rose dared not follow him; they feared to increase the terrible irritability that was gaining so rapidly upon him.

At length three o'clock struck; and at that moment the ladies were in the parlour on the ground floor, while Mr. Foster was moving about in the upper part of the house. The door of the parlour was open, and the two unhappy females sat listening in breathless silence; for every time the sounds of the merchant's footsteps ceased to be heard by them, if only for a few moments, a mortal terror seized upon them. And yet they dared not reveal to each other, even by a look, the dreadful apprehensions which they mutually felt.

Presently, soon after the clock in the kitchen had struck thrice, Mr. Foster was heard to enter his dressing-room. His wife knew that he had pistols there; and, unable any longer to restrain herself, she rushed from the parlour. Rose, animated with a poignant sympathy, hastened to follow her; and the two ladies were hurrying up the stairs, when the report of firearms fell upon their ears. A scream burst from the lips of each; but still they ran — they flew to the dressing-room!

And there — great God! what a spectacle met their horrified vision! He whom they loved was no more. Stretched upon the carpet, with his head frightfully shattered, lay the desperate suicide; while the thin white smoke was curling in wreaths toward the ceiling, and the air was impregnated with the smell of the powder.

With a piercing scream, Rose threw herself upon the corpse of her sire and gave way to all the anguish of her indescribable grief. But the effect produced upon Mrs. Foster was different. For a few moments, nay, for nearly a minute, did she stand transfixed upon the threshold of the chamber, her eyes bent with an awful wildness upon the scene before her. Then, suddenly a rending, thrilling, penetrating shriek burst from her lips, — a lengthened vibration as the heart's cords broke in twain; and she fell headlong, a lifeless corpse by the side of her husband.

At this moment the servants entered the room, and Rose was borne away, in a senseless state, to her own chamber.

But scarcely had one of the domestics begun to administer restoratives to the unfortunate girl who had thus suddenly been made an orphan, when a loud double knock at the door called down the other dependent to answer the imperious summons.

The arrival was Mr. Meagles, who came as the bearer of the money which was to satisfy the merchant's claim upon the prince. The Amazon had introduced the Marquis of Saint Croix to his Royal Highness's private apartment at the very moment that the clock was striking one, and in less than a quarter of an hour the bond was signed and the cash paid down. But the prince was so much pleased with the old French nobleman that he insisted upon his staying to partake of lunch; and when Tim Meagles suggested the propriety of devoting immediate attention to Foster's business, the prince exclaimed flippantly, " Oh, an hour more or less will not make any difference to the vulgar trader; you must stay and take a glass of wine, Tim, and then you shall go." Meagles was forced to comply with his patron's desire; and it was two o'clock ere he quitted Carlton House to go into the City. But, having a good horse to his gig, he speedily accomplished the distance between the princely dwelling and the merchant's counting-house. Here he learned that Mr. Foster had not been in town all day, and he therefore resolved to proceed at once to the Edgeware Road.

We have, however, seen that he reached Mr. Foster's private residence too late. And now he learned, with unfeigned horror, the terrible tragedy that had taken place, and which had deprived a young and beautiful girl of both her parents all in a moment.

Meagles entered the house, visited the scene of suicide and sudden death, and, hearing that Miss Foster had by this time recovered her senses, solicited a few moments' interview with her. The man was naturally good-hearted; and the incidents which had just occurred not only shocked him cruelly, but likewise created in his bosom a feeling of interest with regard to the fatherless and motherless maiden. The servant informed the half-distracted young lady that a gentleman who appeared to sympathize deeply with her sorrows desired to see her, and she was accordingly persuaded to grant the request.

In a few minutes, therefore, Meagles beheld a tall, graceful, and very lovely girl enter the drawing-room, to which he had been shown; and, although she was nearly overwhelmed with a sense of the tremendous affliction that had fallen upon her, yet was he struck by the beauty of her countenance and the sylphlike elegance of her form.

"Miss Foster," he said, approaching her, and speaking in a low and tremulous tone, "I dare not offer a word of consolation. Were I your friend, I should venture to do so; were I your brother, I should naturally undertake the task. But, being a stranger, an utter stranger, I can only say, and with truth, that I never was so profoundly affected in all my life."

Rose bent upon him a look which expressed the deep gratitude she experienced for this manifestation of sympathy, but she was unable to utter a word. Her feelings choked her; and, sinking upon a seat, she burst into tears.

Meagles suffered her to weep without interruption for several minutes, during which she forgot that he was present; and at length, raising her countenance, — which was as lovely as loveliness could make it, but pale with indescribable woe, — she remembered that he had begged to see her upon some matter of importance. Observing that the look which she cast toward him assumed an expression of inquiry, for her heart was still too full to speak, he hastened to explain his business in as few words as possible. But the communication of the fact that he had brought the money with him only revived her grief in all its bitter intensity; for it struck her in an instant that had he come but five minutes earlier, all, all that had happened would have been spared, and those whom she had lost would be yet alive!

Again, therefore, was she overwhelmed with sorrow for several minutes; but, at length recovering a sufficiency of composure to address a few words to her visitor, she said, in a low and stifling tone, "There remains a duty to be performed to the memory of my father. His name must not be disgraced, even after death. The money which you have brought was destined for a certain purpose, and that purpose must be accomplished. Do you understand me, sir?"

"You mean the payment of a particular debt, Miss

Foster?" observed Meagles. "Give me the address of those harsh creditors, and I will hasten to them without delay."

Rose mentioned the names of Hodson and Morley and their place of business; and Meagles was already about to leave the room, when a thought suddenly struck him. There would be a coroner's inquest on the bodies, and the name of the prince might transpire in connection with the causes that led to the merchant's deplorable suicide.

Turning toward the young lady, he said, in the kindest tone that he could command, "But is there no other duty to be performed toward the memory of your deceased father? Must the world become acquainted with the — the — "

"I understand you, sir — and, oh, I thank you — sincerely thank you!" exclaimed Rose, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "But is it possible? Can the truth be concealed in this instance?"

"If you, Miss Foster, can rely upon your servants," answered Meagles, "I will undertake that neither the coroner nor the parish authorities shall exhibit any impertinent curiosity to pry into a secret which ought to be religiously kept."

The afflicted girl extended her hand to Meagles as a proof of her gratitude for what she conceived to be a generous consideration on his part; and he therefore took his leave, with an intimation that he should return in the evening to report the interview with Hodson and Morley, and to give her any advice which she might require in the distressing circumstances in which she was placed.

Accordingly, at the expiration of about three hours, Meagles called again, and was immediately admitted into Miss Foster's presence. He found her more calm and resigned; and it was a consolation to the poor orphan, even in the depth of such affliction as this, to learn that the debt was paid to the merchants in Wood Street, and that nothing was to be apprehended on the part of the coroner. For the magic influence of the prince's name had been effectually used by Meagles to ensure silence in that quarter, as well as with the parochial authorities.

It was natural that, situated as Rose Foster was, she should receive with attention and gratitude the advice which was now given to her by one whom she already looked upon as a friend sent by Heaven to afford counsel and aid in her orphan and unprotected state. She accordingly permitted him to issue all the necessary instructions for the double funeral, which he proposed should take place as soon and as privately as possible; and ere he took leave of her that evening he insisted upon her retaining in her own charge the few hundreds of pounds which were left out of the fifteen thousand after the liquidation of the debt due to Hodson and Morley.

It was past ten o'clock when Tim Meagles returned to Carlton House, where he immediately obtained a private interview with the prince.

"Is anything the matter?" demanded his Royal Highness, observing that the countenance of his friend was troubled.

"The money was paid too late," replied Meagles in a sombre tone.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the prince, impatiently. "I suppose the poor devil has gone into the *Gazette* — eh?"

"He has gone to another world," answered Meagles; "and this affair does not constitute the finest chapter in the life of your Royal Highness."

"Explain yourself, man!" ejaculated the prince, stamping his foot with increasing impatience and likewise through rage at the taunt so boldly thrown out against him.

"I mean that John Foster has blown his brains out, and that his wife has died of a broken heart," said Meagles, still speaking in a tone of reproach.

"By heaven! this is awkward," cried the prince, turning pale. "There will be a coroner's inquest — a thorough exposure —"

"No, I have stopped all that," interrupted Meagles. "I called upon the coroner and said enough to induce him to take no notice of the affair. I likewise bribed the parish beadle, sexton, and clerk very heavily."

"Thank God!" exclaimed his Royal Highness. "You are an excellent fellow, Meagles! Of course you have not paid the money to the creditors? Well, perhaps it is better that the vulgar trader should have blown his brains out; it is fifteen thousand pounds saved, and you may keep a thousand for yourself, Tim."

"Indeed, your Royal Highness is talking uncommonly fast," said Meagles, scarcely able to repress a feeling of disgust at the thorough heartlessness which the prince was now exhibiting; "for how could we possibly hush up this most unpleasant affair, without paying Hodson and Morley's claim upon the deceased? They knew that your Royal Highness owed Foster the money."

"Ah! I see," observed the prince, in a tone of vexation. "Well, it can't be helped, Tim. I have just left half a dozen good fellows in the banqueting-room, and you shall join us. We intend to keep it up till three in the morning, and shall put your services in requisition for the curaçoa punch. Come!"

"Your Royal Highness will excuse me this evening," said Meagles, who for the first time in his life felt indisposed to mix in conviviality.

"Ah! I presume you have some little love-affair in hand," exclaimed the royal voluptuary. "Well, I wish you success. Let me see you to-morrow."

And having shaken hands with his friend, the prince returned to his companions in the banqueting-room, where he passed the greater portion of the night in dissipation; but during the many hours that thus elapsed, the heartless miscreant never once bestowed another thought upon the Fosters!

Tim Meagles retired to his own lodgings in a pensive mood, the image of the orphan Rose being uppermost in his mind.

But the reader will have observed that, during his interview with the prince, he never once alluded to her, nor even intimated that there was such a being in existence.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TERRIBLE AND STRANGE REVELATIONS

We must now return to Mr. Page, whom we shall find seated at the breakfast-table with his bride, at their lodgings in Southwark, the morning after the wedding-day.

Julia was dressed in a new stuff gown, and wore a neat cap, had her hair nicely arranged, and altogether appeared rather attractive, as she did the honours of the morning meal to her husband.

Upon this individual's countenance there was an expression of satisfaction which indicated that he was very far from repenting of his matrimonial bargain; and as he drank his chocolate and discussed his eggs and buttered toast, there seemed to be an air of domestic comfort about him, proving how readily he had cast off his bachelor habits and assumed those of a man who enjoys his own fireside.

When breakfast was over, and the servant-girl of the house had cleared away the things, Mr. Page drew his chair closer to his wife; and producing the pocketbook from the bosom of his dressing-gown, he said, with a cunning smile, " I suppose you know this, Julia? "

" Yes, it belonged to my father," she replied. " I have often seen him poring over the papers it contains, and he has read most of them to me a great many times."

" Then you know all about the matters they refer to? " remarked Page, interrogatively.

" Most of them, no doubt," returned the young woman. " But how came you by the pocketbook? "

" Your father gave it to me in his dying moments. He could barely gasp forth a few words," continued Page, " and those were scarcely intelligible. Let me see — I think I can recollect them exactly. He said, ' Take that pocketbook — tell Julia — Oh! I am going — My God! mercy — mercy — Hannah — Julia — Oh! pardon — mercy — pardon!' And then he expired."

"Ah! he was touched with remorse on his death-bed," observed Julia, a slight humidity appearing upon her eyelashes; but, hastily wiping it away, she added, "He was neither a good brother nor a good father; and I suppose that the way in which he had behaved to his sister, and the manner in which he brought me up, troubled him at last. I was a baby when my mother died; and my father neglected me altogether. When I was able to run alone, I was allowed to paddle about in the gutter from morning to night; and all the education I ever had was got at a charity school."

"But you speak very well, my dear, considering that you had so little instruction in your infancy," said Page, chucking her under the chin.

"Oh, I was fond of reading once — and then, my father was a very well-educated man, and it was impossible not to glean something from him; for of late years — since we settled in that court where he died — he always wanted me to be with him as much as possible. He disliked to be alone."

"You think that his conscience was troubled, Julia?" said Page, inquiringly.

"I am sure it was," responded the young woman, emphatically. "But it's not worth while for me to have any particular secrets from you now, since we are one, as the saying is; and therefore I'll tell you a great many curious things about my father, and also about the matters which some of the papers in that pocketbook refer to."

"Just what I want!" exclaimed Page, drawing his chair still closer to the one which his wife occupied. "It is snowing fast," he continued, glancing over his shoulder at the window, "and we will have a comfortable chat together for an hour or two. If it clears up presently, I will take you out shopping; and then we can have a nice little dinner at a tavern. But all this is on condition that you speak unreservedly, and tell me everything you know. Besides, it will be to your advantage as well as mine, for we may make money by these papers."

"So much the better," observed Julia. "In the first place, then, I must inform you that my father was skilled in chemistry above all things. He was acquainted with many wonderful secrets in that branch, and could compound poisons of the most deadly nature. Oh, my father was a terrible man, though I say it!" she added, with an unaffected shuddering.

"Indeed! But go on," exclaimed Page; "you are not answerable for any of his sins, you know."

"Thank God, I am not!" cried the young woman, energetically. "My life has not been very regular, I confess; but such things as he has done — no, no — never!"

"Don't vex and annoy yourself, Julia," said the commercial traveller, soothingly. "I am dying with impatience to hear what your father did. Pray go on."

"First let us speak of his chemical knowledge," continued Mrs. Page, her excitement almost instantaneously passing away, for she was naturally of a cold and imperturbable disposition. "No man was more expert in that branch than him. He used to compound drugs which produced abortion with ease and never failed in their effects; and all the old midwives in London patronized him."

"God bless my soul — how shocking!" exclaimed Page, involuntarily.

"It is as I tell you," said Julia. "One woman in particular — a Mrs. Lindley, who has a large establishment in Fore Street, Lambeth — was accustomed to purchase great quantities of him. He likewise compounded a poison, one drop of which placed upon the tongue of an infant child produced immediate death, leaving an appearance as if the poor little being had perished of ordinary convulsions. The midwives used to patronize this mixture also."

"There must be a vast amount of crime in London that I never dreamed of," observed Page, shaking his head solemnly.

"No doubt of it!" ejaculated Julia; then instantaneously resuming her wonted calmness of tone and manner, she said, "But the worst — if anything can be worse than what I have already revealed to you — is to come. My father invented a certain poison which he called the 'Heir's Friend.' Do you understand?"

"Not exactly," returned Page. "How do you spell the first word?"

"Oh, I mean the heir that expects property, you know, and is waiting for some one to die off," continued Julia. "This poison was of such a nature that no medical man could tell that it had been taken. It baffled all the cleverest physicians in the world; and while they were attributing the victim's disease to a thousand other things, the real cause was nothing more or less than a few drops of this poison administered twice or three times a week. Being colourless and tasteless, it might be mixed with anything."

"These are indeed strange things that you are telling me," said Page, speaking in a low whisper, as if fearful of being overheard. "But what was the effect of the extraordinary poison you are speaking of?"

"Take, for instance, a person in robust health, and who has never known a day's illness," resumed Julia. "Well, you administer a few drops of this liquid to him, and a change comes over him in four and twenty hours. His constitution seems to give way suddenly; he grows pale, thin, weak, and sickly. His appetite fails him, he loses all energy, both mental and bodily, and literally perishes before your very eyes. It almost appears as if you can see him withering away; and in a few months he sinks into the grave."

"But this is dreadful!" exclaimed Page, with a cold shudder.

"Did I not tell you that my father was a terrible man?" said the young woman. "Well, you can now understand the reason why this poison is called the Heir's Friend. But my father sold very little of it; the traffic was too dangerous, and the price was large in proportion. Moreover, he never would dispose of it in a direct way, — only through the agency of a person named Joseph Warren."

"Ah! a scoundrel who is better known as the Magsman?" cried Page, interrogatively.

"The same. Are you acquainted with him?" asked Julia.

"He was the villain who thrust me into the cellar of the den where the man you call Briggs appears to act as gaoler," responded the commercial traveller. "But go on; I am deeply — though horribly — interested in all you are telling me. Was there no antidote to the wondrous poison you last spoke of?"

"Yes," answered Julia. "And the most extraordinary part of the whole affair is that even if the victim of that poison is at his last gasp, the antidote will be certain, and sure to bring him back to life. It will even go farther, for in a few weeks it will not fail to restore him to all his former health, and gaiety, and appetite, and good looks. This is what my father used to call ' the triumph of the chemical art.' "

" Triumph indeed! " ejaculated Page; " it is almost incredible! "

" But it is nevertheless true," returned his wife. " I have often and often seen him try the effects of both poison and antidote."

" Julia — you — you — make my hair stand on end! " gasped the commercial traveller, suddenly becoming ashy pale.

" You mistake me," she observed, smiling. " I meant upon rabbits, cats, and dogs — and not upon human beings. God forbid! "

" Ah! now I am relieved," said her husband, breathing freely once again. " The experiment must be an interesting one — as an experiment, mind; and I should like to see it tried."

" I can gratify you at any time," returned Julia; " for I have the receipts of both poison and antidote about me at this very moment."

" You have! " cried Page. " What the deuce made you get possession of them? "

" My father was looking over his pocketbook the other day," was the answer, " and he let a paper fall upon the floor. He did not notice the circumstance, and I afterward picked it up. It contained the two receipts I speak of, together with another of quite a different character; and, thinking it just as well that such a document should not be left in the old man's possession, I sewed it inside the lining of my stays. He did not miss it, to my knowledge, up to the hour of his death."

" And what is the other receipt which you allude to as being of a different nature from the poison and the antidote?" asked Page.

" It is more curious and ingenious than positively bad," replied Julia; " although it assists evil-designing persons to carry on a safe correspondence by means of letters. In fact, it consists of two distinct preparations. One is an invisible ink, the other is the chemical wash which must be rubbed over the sheet of paper to render the writing visible."

"Whew!" ejaculated Page, with a whistling sound. "Now I begin to see a clue to something which this pocketbook contains!"

"Very likely," observed Julia.

"But go on, my dear," added her husband. "We will go over the contents of the pocketbook together presently."

"I have little more to tell you," resumed Mrs. Page. "You see that the invisible ink and the chemical wash are very ingenious preparations. Suppose, for instance, that you wanted to correspond on secret matters with some accomplice at a distant place, and you were desirous of making sure that your letters should not be read. You would write with the invisible ink, and the sheet of paper would appear an entire blank. In this way it would go through the post, the address being alone written in proper ink. Well, your friend receives it, washes it over with the chemical preparation, and when it has been dried before the fire, all the writing appears as plain as possible. But this is not all. Suppose that, having read the letter, your friend wishes to keep it by him for future reference. He can restore it to its blank state by dipping it in water, — a simple process, which causes all the writing to disappear once more. The chemical preparation will, however, bring forth that writing again, when required; and this may be done for three or four times without destroying the document."

"Wonderful! wonderful!" ejaculated the commercial traveller. "And you say that you are in possession of these receipts, as well as those for the terrible poison and its counteractive?"

"Yes; you may have them whenever you will," answered Julia.

"We will make use of the chemical preparation to restore the writing this very day, my dear," said Page. "And now tell me, was your father intimately leagued with that Magsman?"

"Much more than I liked," responded the young woman. "Don't you remember that when we were examining the cellar together the night before last, I told you that I hated the man Briggs and all his crew? I don't pretend to be very particular in some matters; but I detest the miscreants that deal in murder by poison or violent means, as I am sure those fellows have long done."

"Well, well," interrupted Page, "you are now removed from their society, at all events. Let us next turn our attention to the papers contained in this pocketbook. Of course the Hannah Lightfoot whose hair is enclosed in one of these papers, and whose Christian name or initials are appended to the letters, was your father's sister, consequently your aunt?"

"She was," answered Julia. "But I never saw her; she died of a broken heart when I was a mere child."

"Now do you think she was really married to the present king, or not?" inquired Page.

"It is impossible to say. I used to ask my father sometimes, but he always evaded the question. For my part, I should imagine that she was; for I believe that her principles were most excellent and her virtue beyond all question. Besides," added Julia, "the contents of that pocketbook appear to prove that she was a wife, and not a mistress."

"Such is my opinion," observed Page. "But how was it that your father, who was evidently such a griping and avaricious man, did not think of making money by these papers?" demanded the commercial traveller.

"I know that he often thought of doing so," was the reply; "but I have heard him say, when he was in conversation with the Magsman upon the subject, that the letters proved nothing. They were restored to my aunt, it appears, when all connection was broken off between her and the present king, then Prince of Wales. But one-half of a certain document in my aunt's possession had unfortunately been lost by her, and that was the only paper which really might have been made good use of, had it fallen in its entire state into my father's hands."

"Then your father never had that document in an entire state?" said Page.

"Never," was the reply. "But I will tell you how that was, for I have often heard the old man speaking about it. It appears that when my aunt's connection with George III — then Prince of Wales — ceased, she retired into the strictest seclusion, living upon a small pension allowed her through the agency of a certain Lady Stamford. My father used to visit her occasionally, and urged her to assist in extorting money from her former lover, or husband, whichever he might have been, and who had now become king. But my aunt always refused with indignation to lend herself to such a proceeding. This caused serious quarrels between them, and at last my aunt removed to some place where he could not find her out. A long, long time elapsed; and it was just before my aunt's death occurred, about sixteen years ago, that she again changed her residence, having been traced out by my father. She now took a lodging at Aylesbury, in the house of a young and new-married couple named Warren."

"What! the Magsman?" ejaculated Page.

"You shall hear. These Warrens were poor; but my aunt believed them to be honest. Mrs. Warren, who was then about four and twenty, was a woman of remarkable beauty and superior education; but having disgraced herself, she was discarded by her family and was glad to marry a junior clerk in Martin's bank at Aylesbury."

"Martin's bank!" exclaimed Page. "Why, all these matters begin to connect themselves together like so many different links of the same chain. But go on."

"Well, one day, when my aunt Hannah Lightfoot was very ill, she had been examining the contents of a pocketbook with great attention, and had wept over them, Mrs. Warren being present at the time. It appears that a piece of paper dropped upon the floor, as my aunt was replacing the documents, and she did not notice it. Mrs. Warren picked it up stealthily, secreted it, and afterward showed it to her husband. It was a portion of a certificate or memorandum, and bore the signature of the present king when he was Prince of Wales. The Warrens kept it, with the determination of securing the other half and obtaining money by it from the government. But, at this crisis, my father again discovered his sister's abode, and made his appearance at the house. His presence caused her death; and he took possession of all her little property, the pocketbook included."

"Perhaps he tried the effect of some of his poisons on the unfortunate lady?" observed the commercial traveller, looking at his wife significantly, as if he had made a very shrewd guess.

"Heaven only knows!" exclaimed Julia. "But I must confess that I have often had my suspicions on that point," she observed, shaking her head ominously.

"Well, go on. I suppose," continued Page, "that your father and the Warrens put their wits together to see what they could do with the papers."

"No such thing!" returned Julia. "The Warrens kept their own secret relative to the half of the document which they had in their possession; and my father walked off with the pocketbook, leaving those people to conduct his sister's funeral. Remember, all this occurred sixteen years ago, just about the time that my mother died. Well, time slipped away, and five or six years back my father and I went to live in that court where he died the other day and you found me. Three years ago he fell in with the Magsman, who about that period took the house next door for his own purposes. My father's name being Lightfoot instantly struck the Magsman with a certain suspicion; and on conversing together they found that they had met before, in past times. For this Magsman was none other than Joseph Warren, formerly a clerk in Martin's bank at Aylesbury. Then Warren told my father about the half of the document which his wife had discovered; and my father was most anxious to learn what had become of it. Warren informed him that soon after the funeral of Hannah Lightfoot had taken place, he wrote to the Home Secretary, enclosing a copy of the fragment of the paper and offering to sell it for a handsome sum of money. The negotiation was long and tedious; but at the end of several months a bargain was struck, and Mrs. Warren was sent by her husband to London to receive the money and give up the document. It, however, appears that she never returned to Aylesbury; and from that moment Warren lost all clue to her. He repaired to London in search of her; all was in vain, and what seemed more extraordinary was the fact that she had not been to the Home Office at all. Her husband therefore concluded that she had met her death either by accident or foul means; and we may suppose that he was not a little vexed at this failure of his grand hopes of enriching himself. He remained in London, and soon took to those ways which we now find him pursuing."

"And how came you to learn all these latter particulars?" asked Page, greatly interested in the singular narrative.

"Because the first interview between my father and the Magsman took place in my presence," was the answer; "and, although I was only sixteen at the time, I was rather sharp for my age and listened to everything I heard."

"We must suppose, from all the facts that are known to us," continued Page, "that the other and most important half of the certificate is irretrievably lost — perhaps destroyed altogether."

"Such was my father's impression after he had heard all that the Magsman told him when they met in the way I have just related; but soon afterward," continued Julia, "something happened to make him alter his opinion on that head, and there is every reason to believe that the other half of the paper is still in existence somewhere."

"Indeed!" cried Page. "But what is this new incident to which you refer?"

"I will tell you," said the young woman. "Many years ago, it seems, the Magsman was acquainted with Jack Rann, the celebrated highwayman, who at that time had a beautiful mistress called Letitia Fluke. This female has since married a rich baronet, and her present name is Lade. About six months ago the Magsman met Lady Letitia, and instantly recognized her, although she was dressed in male attire; for it appears that she is a dashing horsewoman and frequently goes about dressed up as a man. I suppose that she and the Magsman must have conversed together in a confidential way, for in the course of their interview something that he dropped induced the lady to ask further questions, and this led to other proceedings. For, a few days afterward, she paid my father a visit, accompanied by a sporting gentleman whom she called Tim Meagles; and shortly afterward the Magsman arrived. I was turned out of the room; but I listened at the door, and I heard this Meagles make certain proposals to my father for the surrender of the remaining half of the document which he held in his possession."

"Stop!" ejaculated Page, a thought striking him; and, turning over the contents of the pocketbook, he produced the short note written in a neat female hand, and the contents of which were as follows:

"July 7, 1794.

"The next post will bring you a long letter, full of the necessary explanations. Rub it over with the chemical preparation. I shall see T. M. to-morrow evening.

"L. L."

"This is no doubt from the lady you speak of!" exclaimed Page, after hastily glancing over the note. "L. L. stands for Letitia Lade, and T. M. means Timothy Meagles. It is as clear as daylight."

"I never saw that letter before," observed Julia. "To whom is it addressed?"

"To nobody. It doubtless was enclosed in an envelope, which was thrown away."

"Well, I should think it was written to the Magsman," observed Julia, after a few moments' reflection; "because she would scarcely tell my father to use the chemical preparation for the letter that was to follow, — as he was sure to do so on receiving a blank sheet of paper. Besides, I do not remember that either she or Meagles ever paid my father a second visit, and I know that on the occasion when they were all closeted together, as I was just now telling you, the interview concluded in a manner which put an end to all negotiation."

"How was that?" inquired Page.

"Why, when Meagles made his proposals for the half of the certificate," returned Julia, "my father instantly exclaimed, 'Then the other half is in existence; and you know where it is! Perhaps it is even in your possession?' Meagles vowed complete ignorance, and observed that he was a mere agent in the business. Thereupon my father declared that he would only treat with a principal; and he accused the Magsman of knowing more about the affair than he chose to confess. Warren protested against this charge; a quarrel ensued, and Meagles took his departure with Lady Letitia, no arrangement having been made."

"I wonder that the Magsman never tried to rob your father of his papers," observed Page.

"God bless you! he did, within a week after this business," exclaimed Julia; "but the old man concealed the pocketbook so effectually that the search was instituted in vain. The Magsman, Briggs, and a fellow called the Big Beggarman —"

"I know him — the scoundrel!" cried Page. "Upon my word, I am quite at home with all these characters. But go on."

"Well, the three villains got into the house at night, bound my father neck and heels with strong cords, and held a pistol to my head while they ransacked the place; but not a trace of the pocketbook could they find. I suppose the old man used to bury it in the cellar. However, they went away sadly disappointed; and the next morning the Magsman came and made his peace with my father, for I imagine that they were too useful to each other and too deeply mixed up in certain transactions to remain bad friends."

"No doubt of it!" observed Page. "And now that I bethink me again," he continued, producing a paper from the pocketbook, "here is a blank sheet folded in the form of a letter. Perhaps a little application of the chemical wash will elicit more secrets — eh, Julia?"

"Let us try presently. Has it any address?" she inquired.

"None. It was doubtless enclosed in an envelope like the little note; and it may perhaps be the very letter which was to follow that note. But if these missives were really sent to the Magsman, how came they in your father's possession?"

"I know that Warren was constantly pestering the old man about the half of the document," said Julia; "and perhaps he gave him these letters to prove that a negotiation might still be effected with Meagles and Lady Letitia. At all events, the date on that little note — July 7, 1794 — proves that it must have been sent within a very few days after those persons called; because I remember well that their visit took place in the early part of that month last year."

"We will lose no time now in procuring the drugs to make the chemical preparation for this blank letter," said Page; "and we will talk more about the contents of the pocketbook another time. Come," he exclaimed, starting from his seat and approaching the window, "the snow has left off, the weather is clearing up, and we will go out at once. But you must unsew your stays and give me the receipts."

"That is soon done," observed Julia; and she entered the bedroom for the purpose, while Page secured the pocketbook in a cupboard, of which he was careful to take the key.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE AMAZON AND TIM MEAGLES

While the preceding conversation was in progress at the lodgings of Mr. Page and his bride in Southwark, an interview of a scarcely less interesting nature took place between Lady Letitia Lade and Tim Meagles.

This gentleman, as we have already intimated, occupied apartments in Jermyn Street. He had a handsome parlour on the first floor, a bedchamber communicating therewith, and a snug little dressing-room adjoining. An elderly widow kept the house, in which there were two or three other lodgers of the male sex; but Mr. Meagles was the one to whom she devoted her best attention, — Mr. Meagles was the pink of perfection in her eyes, — and if ever she wished to convey her ideas of a true gentleman, it was Mr. Meagles whom she held up as an example.

The fact was that Tim paid her liberally, gave little trouble, and was of such a happy and contented disposition that, to use Mrs. Piggleberry's own words, " he never was put out by nothink." He appeared quite unconscious of the trifling fact that he found tea, sugar, butter, bread, and even meat, for his landlady and her servant as well as for himself and his page. If he had a ham for breakfast, he never was astonished to learn on the fourth or fifth morning that it was all gone, and if he had a large joint served up for his dinner one day, he did not exhibit the least amazement the next when Mrs. Piggleberry unblushingly told him to his face that there was nothing in the house and requested him to give his orders. As regularly as possible every six months the worthy woman represented to him that he must have another set of a dozen shirts; and Meagles invariably tossed down the requisite amount, without a murmur. All these little circumstances rendered him a special favourite with Mrs. Piggleberry — as indeed he ought to have been; and the consequence was that she never felt wearied of chanting to all her friends and acquaintances the praises of Mr. Meagles.

But, then, the place suited Tim uncommonly well; and, although he knew that he was robbed through thick and thin, even to the recognition of his very shirts upon the person of his landlady's brother, who was in poor circumstances and kept a small shop in the neighbourhood, yet he consoled himself with the reflection that he should be plundered to an equal extent in any other lodgings, without perhaps enjoying the same freedom from impertinent curiosity and prying observation as he experienced beneath the roof of Mrs. Piggleberry. For this good creature never appeared to see or hear anything that she ought not. Though Lady Letitia was a frequent visitor at Tim's apartments, the discreet old woman pretended to be quite ignorant of her sex, and invariably announced her as Mr. Lade; and if he invited to his lodgings any ladies who were not dressed in male attire, Mrs. Piggleberry would never suffer it to appear that she suspected their equivocal character, but spoke of them as "Mr. Meagles's charming cousins." Moreover, when Tim had a party of gentlemen to sup with him, and when he said, next morning, "My dear Mrs. Piggleberry, I am afraid we kicked up a frightful row all last night," she would assume an air of amazement, and exclaim, "Why! deary me, sir, I was only observing a minit ago to the servint-gal that the house never was so quiet!" And yet perhaps the uproarious songs, peals of laughter, and insane shoutings had brought the watch thundering at the door half a dozen times between midnight and sunrise.

We have already hinted that Meagles had a page or footboy; and we must pause for a few moments to state that this precocious youth of fourteen was one of the sharpest, cleverest, and most knowing young rascals in the metropolis. He was short, slim, genteel, and good-looking; his livery became him admirably, and, whatever his real name might have been, he was invariably called by the pseudonym of "Wasp." Active, faithful, mischievous, and discreet, he was invaluable to Meagles, a plague to the servant-girl, a little devil in the eyes of Mrs. Piggleberry, who, however, declared that he was the quietest and nicest boy she ever met with, and a complete imp in the estimation of the second and third floor lodgers, on whom he was always playing off his tricks.

In addition to this human appendage, Meagles had a groom to take care of his two horses, which he kept at stables hard by; but as the man did not live in Mrs. Piggleberry's house, we can scarcely include him in the establishment which we have been describing.

To resume the thread of our narrative, it was, as we have already observed, on the same morning when Mr. Page and his wife were seated in confabulation in the Borough, that Lady Letitia Lade partook of breakfast with her friend Meagles. It was about ten o'clock when the Amazon arrived; and her cheeks were glowing with the flush of health, while her hair glittered like hyperions with the morning dew, for she had already taken a gallop three or four times around Hyde Park to give her an appetite.

And an appetite, indeed, she brought with her; inasmuch as vigorous were the assaults she made upon the cold fowl and ham and the pigeon pie, which viands she washed down with bottled ale, her taste being decidedly repugnant to bohea and mocha.

When the repast was over, Meagles said, " Now, Letitia, let us have a little conversation upon business. You are such a harum-scarum creature, that it is difficult to induce you to settle down your thoughts to anything serious."

" That's not true, Tim," she exclaimed. " Did I not play my part well the other day, and afford you ample time to open the prince's desk? and did you not obtain all the papers you required? "

" Yes, I must admit that you did keep George pretty well engaged in the bathroom," said Tim. " But mind you don't repeat the pastime till I want your services again for any similar purpose."

" You are jealous, are you, Tim? " cried the lady, laughing heartily. " Why, you unreasonable dog! You first tell me what I am to do: you make me promise to talk about the bathroom, in order to lead the prince to invite me to view it — you know what must inevitably follow — and then you are more than half-inclined to upbraid me. Now, this is too bad! "

"Well, we won't say any more about it, Letitia," returned Meagles. "Let us talk of business. And, in the first place, I must tell you that I last night had another proof of the prince's utter selfishness and thorough want of heart."

"In what way?" demanded Letitia.

"You know it was George's fault that I did not go off at once yesterday and pay the money to that poor devil Foster," resumed Meagles. "The consequence was that I arrived too late — the poor man had blown his brains out!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Amazon, with unaffected horror.

"Yes, and his unfortunate wife fell down dead upon the disfigured corpse of her suicide husband," continued Meagles.

"This is too shocking!" cried Lady Letitia. "I would not for all the world become the cause of such a catastrophe," she added, with the emphasis of sincerity.

"Nor I either. And now, will you believe me when I assure you that the prince received the dreadful intelligence with the most heartless indifference; or, I should rather say, that any feelings which he displayed in the matter were those of an intense selfishness. His first impulse was to express anxiety lest the circumstances of the suicide should transpire and expose his name to scandal and obloquy. But I had already taken measures to save him from that ignominy; and when he was thus reassured, he indulged in a fiendish hope that I had not parted with the money which the Marquis of Saint Croix advanced, and which had been destined to pay the amount due to the ruined Foster!"

"I am not surprised, but I am horror-stricken by the prince's conduct," said Lady Letitia. "What followed?"

"I told the prince that I had paid the debt for which Hodson and Morley so cruelly pressed the deceased, and so indeed I had. He was much vexed at having thus lost the chance of using the money for his own purposes; but he speedily consoled himself with the prospect of passing a jovial night, for he had company in the banqueting-room. I refused to join them, and came home."

"And this is the heartless man who is one day to become the Father of his People!" exclaimed the Amazon, in a tone of deep disgust. "You do well, Tim, to adopt all kinds of precautions," she added, at the expiration of a minute, "to guard against being ill-treated by him eventually."

"Yes, he looks upon me as a mere tool; but he shall find that he cannot play tricks with me," returned Tim, his usually frank and open countenance becoming sombre and menacing. "I have got him in my power, and I shall not easily resign my hold upon him. In the caprice of a moment he is capable of discarding me — "

"Or rather of attempting to do so," interrupted Letitia.

"Yes, that is what I meant," said Meagles; "because the instant that he seeks to make me the victim of his heartlessness, I proclaim my independence, I threaten him with exposure, I wring from him all that I choose to demand! Do you think that a peerage and a good pension for life would be too much for my services, Letitia?" demanded Tim, his countenance expanding into a smile of mingled triumph and satisfaction.

"Not a whit!" was the energetic reply "And remember," added the huntress, fixing her wanton looks upon him, "when Sir John Lade dies — "

"I know what you mean, my beauty," exclaimed Meagles; "there is no necessity to remind me of our bargain. It shall be a marriage partnership, and instead of a baronet's wife, you shall become a peeress. Yes, this I can safely promise," he continued, in a musing tone; "for, possessed as I am of those documents, our royal friend would not dare to refuse me even the title of a duke in order to purchase their restoration."

"You have examined them attentively?" asked Lady Letitia.

"Since they came into my hands the other day I have read and reread them a dozen times," responded Meagles. "They fully prove all that we had long suspected in reference to the nature of his connection with Mrs. Fitzherbert; and, as luck would have it, the packet contained a certain little fragment which I never anticipated to find amongst those papers."

"What! you do not mean the half of the certificate relating to the prince's father and Hannah Lightfoot?" exclaimed the Amazon.

"I mean nothing else, I can assure you, my beauty," answered Tim, chuckling with satisfaction. "And what is more, we will renew our negotiations with that fellow Warren — the Magsman, as he is called — respecting the purchase of the other half, which remains in the possession of that crabbed old rascal, Lightfoot; but this time, Letitia, these negotiations shall be on our own account, and not for the behoof of the prince."

"Admirable!" cried the gay lady, her splendid countenance glowing with delight. "It is upwards of six months, I should imagine, since we first took steps in that matter; and, having failed, the thing has been neglected. But I never learned how the half of the document originally fell into the hands of the prince," she continued, in an inquiring tone; "and you have often promised to give me an explanation."

"Well, I will do so now, my charmer," returned Meagles; "and the narrative will afford you a little further insight with respect to the character of our friend George. It will, moreover, prove that we are fully justified in obtaining possession of papers for the purpose of overawing him, inasmuch as he has not hesitated to adopt the same course with a view to coerce his own father."

"What! to menace and threaten the king?" exclaimed Letitia, in astonishment.

"Nothing more nor less," responded Meagles, coolly. "Listen. It was a little more than fifteen years ago that the prince — then only eighteen — was one evening walking by himself down Whitehall, when he espied by the lamplight a beautiful young woman who appeared to be surveying the buildings in that neighbourhood as if she were looking for some particular house or government office. He accosted her, and soon got into conversation with the charming stranger. She told him that she had come from Aylesbury on important business, and was anxious to obtain an interview with the Home Secretary as soon as possible. The prince assured her that it was too late to procure an audience of that functionary; and she finally agreed to accompany him whithersoever he chose to take her. I need scarcely tell you that they passed the night together; and so pleased was the stripling George with his new acquaintance that he was by no means desirous for the amour to terminate there. He accordingly made her certain proposals, offering to maintain her as his mistress, and revealing who he was. The young woman was overjoyed at having captivated the prince; and, in the fulness of her delight, she told him the object of her journey to London. In fact, this was none other than Mrs. Warren, the wife of the fellow who is now known as the Magsman."

"I remember well that when I first knew Warren, fourteen or fifteen years since," said Lady Letitia, "he told me and Rann how he had come up to London to look for his wife; and he also acquainted us at the same time with the object of her journey. Therefore, when I met Warren again, six or seven months ago, one of the first questions I put to him was whether he had ever succeeded in finding his wife; and, after replying in the negative, he observed it was vexatious that the one-half of the certificate had disappeared with her, because accident had thrown him in the way of the late Hannah Lightfoot's brother, in whose possession the other half existed. I subsequently mentioned this fact to you, Tim, if you remember; and then you told me, for the first time, that you had seen in the hands of the prince the fragment which Mrs. Warren had originally brought with her to London."

"I recollect," said Meagles; "and it was fortunate that the Magsman had told you where he might be found in case his services were ever needed."

"Not particularly fortunate, either," returned the Amazon; "for when you and I visited old Lightfoot, according to a previous arrangement with Warren, the crabbed old fellow would not so much as show us his half of the document, much less part with it on any consideration."

"He fancied he should get more by treating with the principal," observed Meagles. "But now that we have resolved to renew the negotiations, and on our own account, too, we will be more liberal in our offers than the means of the prince permitted us to be six or seven months ago. You can obtain three or four thousand pounds from Sir John, can't you, my beauty?"

"Leave me to manage that, Tim," replied the Amazon. "And now finish your story about Mrs. Warren."

"Oh, I had completely lost sight of that," exclaimed Meagles. "Well, I was saying that the prince made proposals to Mrs. Warren, and that she acquainted him with the object of her journey to London. He induced her to give up the fragment of the certificate to him, and he provided splendidly for her; but I never could learn from him what became of her, nor how long their connection lasted. All I know is that she certainly did not go back to her husband; and perhaps she was very glad to be separated from a fellow who, to judge by his present appearance and manners, was likely enough to have been coarse and brutal fifteen or sixteen years ago."

"He was never a polished diamond," remarked Lady Letitia. "But poor Rann made him useful during the few months that their acquaintance lasted; and afterward I totally lost sight of the fellow until I met him last July."

"To return to what we were talking about," resumed Meagles, "I must inform you that the prince had the most selfish motives in getting possession of the fragment of the certificate signed by his father, instead of letting the Home Secretary buy it up. For George the Third had already experienced good reason to complain of his eldest son's extravagances; and the prince thought that it would be as well to hold in his hand the means of coercing his father at pleasure. Accordingly, more than once has he threatened his Majesty to enclose the paper to the queen, unless his demands were satisfied; and as the king stands in awful dread of his royal wife, the prudish and snuff-taking Charlotte, this menace has usually had the desired effect. But the next time that the prince contemplates using the mysterious fragment, he will search for it in vain," added Meagles, with a laugh of satisfaction. "In fact, I have succeeded in getting the king, the prince, and Mrs. Fitzherbert completely into my power."

"Mrs. Fitzherbert!" exclaimed Lady Letitia. "I do not see how she is precisely in your power, Tim. It is true that you have ascertained the real nature of her connection with the prince; but perhaps she would thank you for proclaiming it, rather than feel herself aggrieved."

"Ah! this is another secret of mine, you harum-scarum good-for-nothing," said Meagles, with a sly look. "But I do not intend to make any mystery of it toward you, Letitia," he added, almost immediately, "now that we have determined to pull together in the same boat. The fact is, that the influx of these foreign refugees has proved of some service; for on the one hand it has thrown upon our shores a Marquis of Saint Croix to lend a good round sum to the Prince of Wales, and on the other hand it has sent amongst us a Marquis of Bellois to give certain curious information to Mr. Timothy Meagles."

" What do you mean? " inquired the Amazon, animated with the most lively curiosity.

" I mean that eight years ago Mrs. Fitzherbert visited France," replied Meagles; " and that at Plombières she became acquainted with a nobleman of handsome appearance and elegant manners. I mean also that she fell deeply in love with him, and that she accompanied him to Paris, where in due time a child was born — the issue of this amour. The nobleman to whom I allude was the Marquis of Bellois."

" And is the prince ignorant of this chapter in the life of Mrs. Fitzherbert? " asked Lady Letitia.

" He has not the remotest suspicion of it," returned Meagles. " It was in consequence of a quarrel which took place between them at the time, that Mrs. Fitzherbert withdrew to France; and her absence lasted altogether eighteen months. During that interval her amour with the Marquis de Bellois took place; but, fortunately for her, the offspring of the connection was born dead. Scarcely had she recovered from her confinement, when letters from the prince reached her, imploring that she would return to England. She assented, and the French nobleman was abandoned by his beautiful mistress. Nearly seven years have elapsed since Mrs. Fitzherbert thus came back to the prince; and now the marquis has himself arrived in London. He is a gambler, a debauchee, an unprincipled profligate; and he is in possession of letters proving his connection with Mrs. Fitzherbert. I have seen and read them; and the marquis intends to convert them into a means of replenishing a purse which extravagance has emptied. Those papers, Letitia," added Meagles, emphatically, " you and I must purchase. With a thousand pounds I will undertake to secure them."

" And I will guarantee to furnish you with the requisite amount in the course of the week, Tim," answered the Amazon. " At the same time, I do not foresee any particular advantage in possessing weapons which, in all probability, you will never have to use against Mrs. Fitzherbert."

" Let us provide our bow with as many strings as possible, my dear Letitia," observed Meagles. " Who can tell what may happen? The king may die soon, and our friend George, when once seated on the throne, may choose to cast the Royal Marriage Act to the winds and proclaim Mrs. Fitzherbert his wife and his queen. In such a case, would it be of no avail to us that the honour of the lady exists in our keeping? But, under any circumstances, when we have obtained as much as we can get from the prince, we shall then demand more through the influence and agency of Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"You are right, Tim," said the Amazon. "We will secure the possession of the Marquis of Bellois's papers. And now, when are we to renew our negotiations with Joseph Warren, the redoubtable Magsman?"

"You and I will pay that worthy a visit this very evening, my beauty," answered Meagles. "Only fancy what a glorious thing it would be for us if we should succeed in obtaining the other half of the certificate, and if, when put together, the entire document proved that the present king was really married to Hannah Lightfoot! Why, not only would the honour of the sovereign be completely in our hands, but likewise the validity of his alliance with the queen and the legitimacy of all his children."

"To be sure!" ejaculated the huntress. "But I am afraid, from certain expressions — mangled and fragmentary though they be — in the moiety of the document which we now possess, that no real marriage ever took place."

"The whole tenor of that moiety, so far as we can understand it," said Meagles, "admits of two interpretations, — one for, and the other against a belief in such a marriage. It is impossible to decide between them until we can peruse the document as a whole; and this evening we will endeavour to lay a train for the purchase of the fragment in old Lightfoot's possession," added Tim; for the old man's death was unknown to him and the Amazon.

"I dare say we shall succeed," observed the latter, rising from her seat. "We shall work with more energy now that it is for ourselves, than we did when the prince commissioned you to negotiate privately in his behalf. But it is now midday, Tim, and the weather is clearing up. I must hasten home, change my Amazonian garb for a silk gown, gipsy bonnet, and warm furs, and appear in a dress which, as the common phrase goes, is suitable to my sex," she added, laughing.

"And pray whom are you bent upon captivating to-day?"

demanded Tim, bestowing upon the splendid creature a caress which she received in a manner indicating that, however profligate she might be, and however lavish of her favours she notoriously was, she nevertheless entertained something like a sincere affection for Meagles.

"So far from having any such idea as you impute to me, Tim," she said, in answer to the question which he had jocularly put to her, "I mean to play the amiable toward old Sir John, and take him out for an airing in the carriage. He will be so delighted that nothing I may ask will be refused; and I shall pave the way to obtain the few thousands that you and I are likely to require for our purposes in the course of the week. Adieu for the present, my dear Tim. I shall call for you at about eight this evening, and we will then proceed together to the classic region of Horslydown."

"Adieu, my charmer," returned Meagles, pressing his lips to her rich red mouth; and the Amazon took her departure from the lodgings of her paramour.

We cannot close this chapter without directing the attention of the reader to the fact that Mr. Meagles had maintained toward Lady Letitia Lade the same secrecy and silence relative to the orphan Rose which he had observed on the preceding evening with the Prince of Wales.

CHAPTER XXX

MR. PAGE AND HIS WIFE

We now go back to Mr. Page and his wife, whom we shall find proceeding arm in arm from the Borough toward old London Bridge.

The commercial traveller, flattering himself that he was a man worth six thousand pounds in ready money and possessing papers calculated to produce as much again, walked with his head erect and an air of such assurance that one would have thought the entire metropolis belonged to him. In this respect he was well matched by Julia, who, fancying that her gaudy bonnet and her flaunting shawl were sufficient to render her " quite the lady," marched along with an assumption of vulgar pride which made her seem as if she fancied the street was not half wide enough for her. The little boys stared at the singular-looking couple, sober-minded people experienced a sentiment of pity for their vanity, and when the poor shivering beggars touched their hats or curtsied, as the case of sex might be, Page held his head up higher still; for it struck him that he was all of a sudden very much respected.

In this manner they crossed the bridge, and proceeded straight to Wood Street, where they entered the warehouse of Messrs. Hodson and Morley.

The senior partner happened to be there at the moment, superintending the unpacking of some bales of goods which had just arrived; and, on hearing the door open, he raised his eyes and beheld the commercial traveller with a bold-looking woman hanging to his arm.

Mr. Hodson was astonished; and, putting on his spectacles, he indulged in another long stare at the newly married couple. Yes, it was really Page, — Page with his hat cocked jauntily on one side of his head, and with such a smirking familiarity expressed alike in his countenance and manner, that the sedate merchant knew not whether to consider him drunk or demented. But how different from the Mr. Page who used to take off his beaver the instant he crossed the threshold, and who was wont to glide noiselessly through the warehouse direct into the private office as if he were treading upon eggs! And then that woman, too, with the flaunting dress of a vulgar upstart and the bold looks of a courtesan! What could it all mean? Mr. Hodson knew not; he was bewildered, and, turning toward the porter, who stood gazing open-mouthed upon the pair, he said, in a hollow tone, " Ask Mr. Morley to step this way."

" I hope I don't intrude, Hodson," exclaimed Page, caressing his chin and speaking in a sort of blandly patronizing tone; " but I thought that as I was in the neighbourhood I might just as well drop in to ask you how you got on, and likewise to tell you, my boy, to look out for another country traveller, as I've cut the thing dead. D'ye hear, Hodson? "

The merchant had indeed heard; but he could scarcely believe his ears. Was it possible that Page had called him " Hodson," — plain and simple " Hodson," — ay, and twice, too? He was aghast with surprise; and he began to wonder whether the world had suddenly turned upside down, when Mr. Morley came hurrying forth from the countinghouse.

" Ah! Page — is that you? " cried the junior partner, who was a short, thin, active little man. " Well, I'm glad to see you're alive and hearty, after all you've undergone. But who is this young woman? " he demanded, his eyes settling suspiciously upon Julia.

" This lady, sir," said Mr. Page, pompously, " is my wife. And I am proud and happy to inform you, friend Morley," he added, unbending a little, " that she has brought me a fortune of twenty thousand pounds."

As he uttered these words, he pressed Julia's arm slightly with his own, in order to intimate that she need not contradict the little lie which his vanity prompted him to tell respecting the amount of her dowry.

" Twenty thousand pounds! " ejaculated Hodson and Morley, as if it were in the same breath.

" Not a farthing more or less, I can assure you," said Mr. Page, tapping his cane impressively upon the floor.

" Well, I am delighted to hear it, my dear friend," exclaimed Hodson, who worshipped Mammon far more devoutly than he did either royalty or aristocracy.

" And so am I, Page — quite rejoiced," added Morley, whose deity was also Money.

And then the two partners shook their late traveller warmly by both hands; and, having done this, they offered their congratulations to Mrs. Page, hoping that they should have the pleasure of introducing her very shortly to Mrs. Hodson and Mrs. Morley. It was indeed wonderful to behold the effect which the magic words " twenty thousand pounds " had produced upon the stiff and starch senior partner, and the active, bustling, business-like junior. Julia no longer appeared in their eyes to have the boldness of a courtesan; in their minds her demeanour had suddenly become associated with debentures, her character with cash, her features with funds, and her entire countenance with consols; and they were seized with anxiety that their wives should make her acquaintance. Even when she tossed her head, gave herself airs, and said something about calling another day, they overwhelmed her with politeness; and there was a great deal more shaking hands ere Mr. Page and his bride took their leave on this occasion.

Having thus shown themselves off in Wood Street, they repaired to St. Paul's Churchyard, where Mr. Page procured some drug at a chemist's shop. Thence they proceeded into Fleet Street, where he bought another drug at another shop; and in the Strand he made his third purchase.

" You see, Julia," he observed, as they walked along, " that I exercise a sound discretion in thus obtaining the things at different places. There are three ingredients in the chemical preparation for the wash to put upon the blank sheet of paper; and if I purchased them all at the same shop, the chemist would begin to mix and compound the moment our backs were turned, in order to discover for what purpose we wanted such scarce and expensive articles."

" God bless your soul, Henry," exclaimed his wife, " you are only acting with a prudence that is quite natural. My father always did the same; and therefore I don't see anything to be so particularly proud of."

" Well, well, my dear," returned Page, " at all events, you perceive that I adopt the same precautions as your deceased father, and he was a very shrewd man."

" Just so," said Julia; and, to use a parliamentary phrase, the subject then dropped.

Having completed their chemical purchases, and likewise a little " shopping " for the behoof of Mrs. Page, the worthy couple entered a tavern, where a private room and a good dinner were immediately ordered. They did ample justice to the repast; and when it was over, a hackney-coach conveyed them back to the borough of Southwark.

It was dusk when they reached their lodgings; and as soon as the candles were lighted and the curtains were drawn in the parlour, they seated themselves by the cheerful fire and began to compound the chemical wash in accordance with the receipt. This employment occupied nearly half an hour; and when the preparation was made, the pocketbook was once more produced. The blank sheet of paper already so often referred to was then spread out upon the table; and, by the assistance of a large camel's-hair brush, the wash was carefully laid on. With feelings of acute suspense did Page now hold the paper in front of the fire; and as the moisture slowly exhaled, he observed with satisfaction that lines of writing gradually appeared upon the sheet.

" By Jove! it is just as you described! " he exclaimed, glancing triumphantly toward Julia. " The receipt fulfils all you have told me. Look — the contents of the letter are standing out, as it were, from amidst the misty vapour. And 'tis just the same neat female handwriting as that in the little note signed ' L. L.' Yes, this is the letter which was to follow by the next post — there's not a doubt of it! We're on the point of penetrating into some strange mysteries, I'll warrant! Holloa! I do believe that the document contains a copy of the other half of the certificate."

" To be sure it does! " said Julia, bending down so as to obtain a nearer view of the letter as her husband held it before the fire. " There's a short passage running down the right-hand of the page — and I can read the name of ' Hannah Lightfoot ' in it! Come — that will do — it is dry enough now. Let us examine it at once."

" We will," returned Page. " I am even more impatient than you are. Because, if the certificate should prove that your aunt was really married to the present king, our fortunes are made. Even if it should be otherwise, we are in possession of papers which the government will cheerfully buy."

"While you are talking thus, the letter will singe," said Julia, somewhat impatiently. "Let us see what it contains, and debate upon it afterward."

"We will, my dear," answered Mr. Page. Then, placing the document before him upon the table, he read it aloud, in slow and measured terms:

"July 7, 1794. Evening, 6 o'clock.

"My little note of this morning has prepared you for the receipt of this; and you must now judge whether it is worth while for you to compel old Lightfoot by foul means to surrender up his half of the paper, since he refuses to do so by fair means. T. M. has procured a copy of the half which is in the possession of the individual who employs him in the business; and thus it runs:

"'may concern, and know ye, all
the undersigned, George Prince of
cknowledge that I do now take
wife in the sight of an all-seeing
ewise undersigned Miss Hannah
nderly and devotedly love with
ul, and who fully as sincerely,
me in return, with all her true
w likewise, all persons whom
nly and sacredly bind and pledge
ght of an all-seeing heaven, that
shall so dispose the heart of my
as to grant his royal and paternal
ssion to the proper celebration
signed Miss Hannah Lightfoot, —
at refusal which so very sorely
sion to the royal throne of
se (which God long prevent!)
lay, make her my wife and Queen:
dy consider ourselves to be
tly and severally set our hands
sence of a competent witness,
ousand seven hundred and fifty-seven.
George P.
Hannah Lightfoot.'

Such is the copy of the fragment in the possession of the person who employs T. M. in the matter: but who that person is, you must not expect to learn. Indeed, it can have nothing to do with the share which you are required to take in the matter. You saw the other day that Lightfoot was obstinate; it is therefore useless for T. M. and me to negotiate with him any more. But you told me, when I saw you last night, that you had many and cogent reasons for not coming to a rupture with the old man. Surely the thousand guineas T. M. offers you through me — and with the chance of two thousand — will amply remunerate you for any loss you may sustain in consequence of a quarrel with Lightfoot. Besides, if — as you hinted — he and you are so useful to each other and so mixed up in several matters, he will forgive you in the long run for temporarily turning against him.

" The preceding is a faithful copy of the fragment in the possession of T. M's. principal. You, who have seen the half in Lightfoot's hands, can now judge of the value of the document as a whole. This we must leave to you; because, inasmuch as the obstinate old fellow would not even allow me and T. M. a sight of his moiety, we are utterly unable to form an opinion of the tenor of the paper when read and viewed in its complete state. But now observe: if the document, when read as a whole, confesses marriage, then it is of first-rate importance, and the reward given to you for what we require of you shall be two thousand guineas. But if the document should be found to contain only a promise of marriage, the sum shall be one thousand guineas, as originally proposed by T. M. Thus stands the matter. If we hear no more from you, we shall conclude that you decline proceeding farther in it; if the contrary be the case, you can write to me at my own house. In this latter alternative, you will do well to use the invisible ink; for although Sir J. would never dream of opening any correspondence addressed to me, it is as well to guard against impertinent curiosity on the part of menials. I told you in my note of this morning that I shall see T. M. to-morrow evening; I hope to hear from you by that time.

"L. L."

" Now, then, all mystery is cleared up in respect to the certificate," exclaimed Page, when he had brought the perusal of this letter to an end; " and it does not prove a marriage. On the contrary, it shows that the present king and your aunt were never united by any legal ceremony, — at least up to the period when that paper was signed."

" Let us put our original half against the copy of the other one," said Julia, " and see how the whole reads."

" We will," returned Page; and, having followed his wife's suggestion, he found that the memorandum or certificate ran in the ensuing terms:

" Take notice, all ye whom it may concern, and know ye, all men, by these presents, that I the undersigned, George Prince of Wales, do hereby declare and acknowledge that I do now take and solemnly consider to be my wife in the sight of an all-seeing heaven and before God, the likewise undersigned Miss Hannah Lightfoot, whom I sincerely, tenderly and devotedly love with all my heart and with all my soul, and who fully as sincerely, tenderly, and devotedly loveth me in return, with all her true heart and all her soul: and know likewise, all persons whom it may concern, that I do solemnly and sacredly bind and pledge myself, before God and in the sight of an all-seeing heaven, that when the will of the Almighty shall so dispose the heart of my august and well-beloved father as to grant his royal and paternal assent and most gracious permission to the proper celebration of my marriage with the undersigned Miss Hannah Lightfoot, — or, in case of perseverance in that refusal which so very sorely grieves me, — then, on my accession to the royal throne of these realms, on my sire's demise (which God long prevent!) I declare that I will, without delay, make her my wife and Queen: — and in token that we do already consider ourselves to be husband and wife, we have jointly and severally set our hands to this document, in the presence of a competent witness this third day of April, One Thousand seven hundred and fifty-seven.

" Witness, GEORGE P.
" WILLIAM STAMFORD, Bart. HANNAH LIGHTFOOT."

" Well," remarked Page, as soon as he had read aloud this singular document, " it is no wonder that the king is sometimes crazy. A pretty load of perjury he has got upon his conscience. The whole country would raise its voice in execration of such a man, were this document made public. But that is not our game. We care nothing about the morality of the thing: all we want is to make money."

"And what do you propose to do?" inquired Julia.

"There are two distinct lines of action open to us," answered Page, after a few minutes' deep cogitation. "One is to sell our half of the certificate to that Mr. Meagles of whom you spoke this morning; the other is to try and get the remaining half into our possession, and then dispose of the complete document to the government. You see that the fragment which we have not got is the most important, because it contains the signatures of the present king and your late aunt."

"But how can we obtain that half?" demanded Julia.

"There is one way, and only one way that I can see," responded Page. "I must call upon Meagles and propose to give him his own price for procuring me the fragment which his principal or employer, whoever he may be, possesses. It would be worth while to venture three or four thousand guineas in such a bargain. We should make ten thousand by it."

"And where are you to get three or four thousand guineas from?" said the young woman, putting the query with some degree of hesitation, amounting even to uneasiness, as if she felt that it was now necessary to reveal something of a disagreeable nature, and that it became impossible to delay the confession.

"Where are we to get such a sum from?" cried her husband, surveying her with astonishment. "Why, haven't we six thousand golden guineas safe in that cupboard?"

"But you must not — you cannot — you dare not pass away many of those coins at the same time," said Julia, speaking with an emphasis which was unusual on her part.

"What the devil do you mean?" demanded Page, with increasing wonderment. "You have come by the money honestly, at all events; it is yours by inheritance, and you are not supposed to have any idea of the illegitimate means whereby your father thus enriched himself."

"Ah! I have already told you that my father was a terrible man," observed Julia, with a strange mysteriousness in her tone and aspect; "and he was acquainted with a number of marvellous secrets."

" So much the better for us! " exclaimed her husband. " The gold which those secrets produced him has fallen into our hands."

" But do you not know what my father originally was? " asked Julia.

" A chemist, I should imagine, or something of that sort."

" Not at all. He was one of the principal coiners in the Royal Mint; and he lost his situation in consequence of being suspected of secreting two or three dies or moulds in which certain pieces of money were cast."

As Julia was giving utterance to these words in a tone of peculiar significancy, a horrible idea stole into the mind of her husband; and, suddenly remembering that letter in the pocketbook which referred to the supply of spurious coin to the bankers at Aylesbury, the sickening suspicion now excited was in a few moments changed into a crushing conviction.

A deadly pallor came over his countenance; and, sinking back in his chair, he murmured in a low and hoarse voice, " Give me a drop of brandy, Julia, or I shall faint."

The young woman hastened to comply with this request; and Page, having drained the wine-glass which she filled with the ardent spirit, began slowly to recover from the consternation that had fallen upon him.

" I had better know the worst at once, Julia," he said, regarding her with haggard eyes. " The contents of those six bags — "

" Are all spurious," she hastened to reply; " there's no use in mincing the matter — and now you've learned the real truth."

" But you should have told me — you should not have misled me — " began Page, his bitter disappointment now changing into fury.

" Stop a moment! " exclaimed Julia, her tone, countenance, and manner all suddenly indicating that she could be a very demoness when roused, difficult though it were to excite her; " you are accusing me wrongfully, and I'll smash your head to pieces with that poker if you give me any more of your nonsense. You sought me out — I did not seek you; you had already made up your mind that my father was a rich miser, and at first I was going to undeceive you; but your intentions toward myself became apparent, and I held my tongue, suffering you to fancy whatever you chose. Now, then, are we not equal? You married me only because you thought I was wealthy — I married you because I wanted a respectable position."

While she was thus speaking, Julia's eyes shot forth living fires, her white teeth gleamed between the lips which the habit of dram-drinking had rendered of an unnatural red, and her cheeks, which dissipation had robbed of the hues of health, became flushed with the purple dye of rage.

"Come, Julia dear — come — I didn't mean to vex you — I — I assure you I did not," stammered Page, absolutely frightened by the fiendish countenance that thus glared so menacingly upon him. "I was wrong — I know that I was — I — I beg your pardon, Julia," he added, humbly.

"Well, you can't do more than that," said the young woman, instantly becoming pacified; and by the aid of a dram she appeared to relieve her feelings altogether. "The only thing you can do, is to make the best of a bad bargain — if you still think it is one. Follow the counsel which my father intended for me in the little scrap of paper scrawled over with a pencil: that is, use the coin wisely, and we shall prosper; use it rashly, and we shall be ruined."

"By Jove! it is my opinion that we had better not use it at all," exclaimed the ex-traveller.

"That be hanged!" responded Julia. "You have already passed away three or four pieces in to-day's purchases; and you saw that on each occasion, when the shopkeepers rang the money on their counters, they were perfectly satisfied with it."

"True!" observed Page, but not without a shudder at the idea of having passed away no less than four spurious guineas in the course of the day.

"You need have no fear of detection, if you only act with caution," resumed Julia, who possessed no ordinary amount of common sense and sterling judgment. "My father was as skilful in coining base money as he was in his chemical experiments. He might have been immensely rich, if he wasn't so timid. The sordid manner in which he lived was a mere blind, to avert suspicion; and there were times when he enjoyed himself with many luxuries, I can tell you. But it was on account of me chiefly that he would not launch out into a decent way of life. He thought that I was naturally extravagant; and that if I was allowed the use of as much of that spurious money as I wanted, I would soon be bringing the Bow Street runners about him. The older he got, the more frightened he grew. But he needn't have entertained such fears for me. I have seen too much to act with anything like a flagrant imprudence. And, therefore, I tell you again that we may use this money, if we do it cautiously."

" It would really be a sin to forego such a chance," said Page, in a musing manner; " especially after having made a successful beginning with the four pieces that we changed to-day. Besides, after all the vapouring and boasting at Hodson and Morley's, it would be wretched indeed to find ourselves taken down so many pegs. The coin is certainly admirable," he observed, balancing one of the spurious guineas on the tip of his forefinger.

" Admirable! " repeated Julia; " I am very sure that not even an officer of the Mint himself could detect it, unless he cut it in two. The weight is the same, there's a thin coating of gold all over, and it is cast in one of the Mint dies. My father was turned out of the Society of Friends on account of losing his place at the Mint through being suspected of stealing the moulds. But the authorities could not bring it home to him, and so he escaped punishment."

" And this letter," observed Page, taking from the pocket-book the one that bore the Aylesbury postmark, and that related to the manner in which the " goods " were to be packed and sent, — " this letter, I suppose, referred to some transaction respecting a supply of spurious coin."

" Yes; the Magsman managed the job, and my father coined the money. Three thousand guineas were first despatched to Aylesbury; and a quantity more was ordered. But for some reason which I never heard, this second supply was not sent. I dare say," added Julia, " that it is to this circumstance we are indebted for the possession of the amount in that cupboard."

" Yes, I see by this letter that the bankers intended to have a second remittance of three thousand in six months," said Page. " That would have been on the 17th of last September; but I suppose that they got frightened and revoked the bargain. However, all this does not relate to our own affairs. What we must now do is to endeavour to negotiate with Lady Letitia Lade or Mr. Meagles for the sale of all the papers concerning Hannah Lightfoot's business; and then we will pay a visit to Aylesbury to discover, if possible, a certain Richard Stamford, to whom we can be of great use."

" In what way? " asked Julia.

" He was the gentleman who was confined with me in the cellar underneath that house adjoining your own in the court," returned Page. " But I will tell you all about that baronet and his misfortunes."

Mr. Page then proceeded to narrate to his wife those circumstances in connection with Sir Richard Stamford which are already known to the reader; and we will now leave the worthy couple to discuss their schemes and their brandy simultaneously, which they did until the clock struck midnight.

CHAPTER XXXI

MR. RAMSEY

In the meantime, scenes of interest were taking place elsewhere; for in the early part of this same evening on which Mr. and Mrs. Page were thus discoursing and enjoying themselves, a tall, handsome, genteel man, enveloped in an ample cloak, landed from a wherry in the immediate neighbourhood of Horslydown, and, having dismissed the boat, sped rapidly toward the Beggar's Staff.

This individual was about eight and twenty years of age. His figure was slight, but admirably proportioned, and by no means deficient in strength; his features were regular and of the Grecian cast; his complexion was of a clear olive, and it would be impossible to imagine finer eyes or more beautiful teeth on the part of one of the sterner sex. His manners were prepossessing, even to fascination; and there was so refined, nay, even so noble an expression in the *ensemble* of his countenance, that an observer would have unhesitatingly marked him as one eminently calculated to make friends with men and conquests amongst women.

It was about seven o'clock, and the evening was very dark, when this individual landed on the bank of the Thames in the vicinity of Horslydown. A few minutes' rapid walking brought him to the Beggar's Staff, the exterior of which he, however, surveyed for a few seconds ere he crossed the threshold, as if to assure himself that it was the place which had been described to him. Satisfied with this brief scrutiny, he boldly entered the boozing-ken, and found himself in the midst of a motley company which seemed to be the rakings of all the vilest dregs of a vile neighbourhood.

The Big Beggarman and Carrotty Poll were serving at the bar; and to them did the newcomer address a whispered inquiry for Mr. Joseph Warren.

" Who are you? " demanded the Big Beggarman, eying his querist suspiciously.

" My name is Ramsey — Philip Ramsey, of Aylesbury," was the immediate response.

" Oh, that's all right! " chimed in Carrotty Poll. " You're not unknown to us, sir," she added, with a sly smile. " Please to walk around," and she opened the little gate which led behind the enclosure whence the liquors were dispensed.

Ramsey accordingly entered the diminutive parlour, into which he was followed by the Big Beggarman and Carrotty Poll, a slipshod waiter of marvellously seedy aspect being left to attend at the bar.

" Pray sit down, sir," said the Beggarman. " As my daughter just now observed, your name's quite familiar to us in this here place. In fact, I was one of the party that managed the spree at Stamford Manor a little while back."

" Ah! you allude to the carrying off of the baronet? " exclaimed Ramsey, unhooking his cloak at the collar. " Then you are doubtless a friend and confidant of Joseph Warren? "

" Better knowed as the Magsman," interjected the landlord of the Beggar's Staff. " Yes, me and that fine feller are staunch pals; and what's his business is my business, and what's my business is his'n."

" Is he to be seen now? " inquired Ramsey, whose countenance wore an expression of deep anxiety. " It is of the greatest consequence that I should obtain an interview with him as soon as possible."

" He is not here, neither is the Gallows' Widow, which is his blowen," answered the Big Beggarman. " They're gone over into Wapping together, and won't be back again to-night."

" Perdition! " ejaculated Ramsey, in a tone of profound vexation. " Every minute's delay is ruinous! "

" Now, don't excite yourself, sir," said Carrotty Poll, in a soothing voice. " We can guess pretty well what it is that's annoying you — "

" Sir Richard Stamford is at liberty! " exclaimed Ramsey, interrupting the young woman, impatiently, and striking the table with his clenched fist.

" We know it," observed the Beggarman. " But it is not our fault; he escaped! "

"You are not deceiving me?" cried Ramsey, in a tone of mingled excitement and menace. "How can you prove to me that he did indeed escape, and that neither you nor Joseph Warren, nor any of your associates, connived at his flight?"

"Well, it may be a difficult matter for me to convince you, Mr. Ramsey," returned the villain; "but if you was t'other side of the river at this moment, I could take you to the place where the baronet was confined, and show you the hole that he made in the wall of the cellar."

"I am inclined to believe you — I do believe you," said Ramsey. "In fact, if I had really suspected treachery on your part I should not have come hither this evening. Mr. Martin assured me that the utmost reliance was to be placed upon Warren, and he urged me to come to London and see him without delay."

"But how did you learn that the baronet had escaped?" demanded the Beggarman; "for the Magsman only wrote this evening to let you know what had happened, and the letter won't reach Aylesbury till to-morrow morning. He was in hopes of being able to discover Sir Richard again, and take him back to his old quarters; and that's the reason why he didn't send you immediate intelligence of his flight."

"Last evening Mr. Martin received the most positive information that Sir Richard had been seen in the neighbourhood of Aylesbury," said Philip Ramsey; "and, as you may suppose, we were stricken with dismay. In fact, it will be ruin to both Martin and myself — positive ruin," added the young man, with frightful emphasis, "if the baronet is allowed to remain many more hours at large. What is to be done?"

"What would you wish to be done?" asked the Beggarman; "and, when you have told us, what will you pay for having it done?"

"You are disposed to assist us — to any extent — to any extreme?" said Ramsey, sinking his voice to a low whisper, which was, nevertheless, full of meaning; and he bent his looks with kindred significancy upon the villain whom he thus addressed.

"Let us understand each other, Mr. Ramsey," observed the Beggarman. "You gave us a good round sum for carrying off the baronet, and keeping him in limbo; and we fulfilled our bargain as far as we could. We don't hold ourselves answerable for his escape — 'cause why, we couldn't help it. We put him in a strong and secure place; and we knowed that we might rely upon Briggs — that's the chap which had him in his care — as well as on our own selves. He wouldn't sign the paper which you and Mr. Martin had drawn up, and that was no fault of our'n neither. But we should have kept him in the cellar till he did; and if he'd held out much longer, we meant to have starved him into compliance. Now, then, you perceive that we did our dooty toward you and your partner as well as we was able; and we don't see that anythink fresh or new which you may want us to have done or to do for you should be executed free gratis for nothink."

"Your observations are perfectly just and your reasoning is correct," said Ramsey. "We are prepared to pay you well for what you must do next."

"In that case, we sha'n't have no quarrels," remarked the Big Beggarman. "But how go on matters at Aylesbury? We saw by yesterday morning's paper that Lady Stamford was not dead, that she was not even mortally wounded, and that the coroner's inquest was held to examine into the cause of the fire, and not the death of the lady, as was at fust reported."

"It is all these circumstances which render it so necessary that Sir Richard Stamford should either be got out of the way — or else put out of the way," returned Ramsey, again fixing a look of dark and sinister meaning upon the countenance of the Beggarman. "The coroner's inquest has decided," he continued, "that the fire was the result of accident, caused by a candle being upset on the supper-table. Thus, the charge of arson no longer presses against Sir Richard Stamford. Then again, a surgical opinion declares that the wound was inflicted on Lady Stamford with her own hand, and therefore the accusation of murder is likewise quashed."

"But the forgeries, Mr. Ramsey, the forgeries?" exclaimed the Beggarman.

"Perhaps the less we say on that subject the better," was the reply, delivered in a sombre and gloomy tone. "But it is useless to remain here, idly conversing on these matters," he continued, his tone suddenly becoming impatient and excited. " Sir Richard Stamford is in the neighbourhood of Aylesbury. We know where he is concealing himself, while he doubtless waits to ascertain how it may turn out with his wife, ere he takes any actual proceedings —"

" And that lady — is she sensible? can she speak so as to give any account of matters that may tell against you, sir? " inquired Carrotty Poll; " for the Magsman informed us that you was pretty intimate with her," she added, with a chuckling laugh.

" She is still hovering between life and death," answered Ramsey, scarcely able to conceal his disgust at the grossness of the woman's manner. " But again I say, do not waste time in asking me questions. Assist me, if you will," he continued, addressing himself to the Big Beggarman; " and if not, I must adopt other means to ensure my safety."

" I have not refused to assist you," replied the burly, red-faced villain, doggedly; " but you haven't given me no instructions."

" You are dull at comprehending a hint," said Ramsey, with an impatient uneasiness and restlessness which indicated that he had already planned a terrible deed, but shrank from avowing his thoughts.

" I remember you observed just now that the baronet must either be got out of the way, or put out of the way," returned the Beggarman. " Well, it is for you to decide how the thing is to be, and then name the recompense you are prepared to give."

Ramsey turned ghastly pale; the next moment a crimson hue spread over his countenance, his eyes glared with a lurid light, and his lips quivered. He looked at the Beggarman, who was cool and collected; he then glanced at the red-haired young woman, whose features were likewise calm and impassible. This survey appeared to give him courage, — that ruffian-like courage with which the gentleman-villain is compelled to fortify himself in order to induce his lips to frame the words which shall express the horrible designs that have already been well digested in his secret thoughts.

" Now, then, sir, what is it to be? " demanded the Beggarman.

" You needn't fear to speak candidly to us," observed Carrotty Poll, encouragingly.

" In course not," added her father. " We ain't partickler, so long as the blunt is forthcoming; " and he laughed in a manner which made Ramsey's blood run cold in his veins and his flesh creep upon his bones.

" Well, after all, you can but refuse, and there will be no harm done," said the latter, in a musing tone and after a short pause. " But it is impossible that you can misunderstand me for a single moment. In a word, the baronet must be put out of the way, or there will be a general exposure, in which we shall all sink! "

" This is serious, but not too serious for us to undertake," returned the Beggarman. " At the same time, we don't fear anythink that may come of such an exposure as you talk of."

" Will five hundred guineas, in good sterling gold, induce you to rid us of this accursed Sir Richard Stamford? " demanded Ramsey, worked up to a pitch of desperation by the ruin that stared him in the face.

" Have you the cash by you? " asked the Beggarman.

" Yes, I have brought it with me," returned Ramsey, producing a heavy bag from beneath his cloak; " and it is yours if you will set out with me for Aylesbury, to do the deed, this very night."

As he uttered these last words in a hoarse whisper, he again secured the money about his person, while his eyes were fixed with an expression of anxious inquiry upon the countenance of the burly villain.

" I will guarantee that it shall be done, but I can't do it alone," responded the latter, after a few instants' deep reflection. " Must it be done to-night? "

" We must set off for Aylesbury to-night," answered Ramsey, impatiently. " Martin will be devoured with the most cruel suspense until my return; and I dare not return unless it be with the certainty that the man who holds my very life in his hand — "

" Well, we won't waste time by talking over it," interrupted the Beggarman. " But we must see the Magsman without delay. He is at the house on t'other side of the river, where the baronet was confined."

" I will accompany you to him," said Ramsey. " Come, let us depart."

" This moment," observed the Beggarman. " We must cross in a boat, — we have a wherry of our own, — and therefore we sha'n't have to go far to find a means of getting over the river. You will go with us, Poll," said the villain, darting a significant look on his daughter.

" Me, father? " she ejaculated, in a tone of unfeigned surprise.

" Yes, you," returned the Big Beggarman. " Suppose that me and the Magsman sets off at once for Aylesbury with this genelman, there'll be some orders to give you about a many little things to do in our absence."

And, as he thus spoke, he kicked his daughter's foot gently under the table.

" Very well, father," she observed. " I shall be ready in a few minutes."

" Stay, I must put on my rough coat and hat," said the Beggarman. " Beg your pardon, sir, for leaving you for a moment," he continued, addressing himself to Ramsey, " but sha'n't keep you waiting long. Maybe you'll take a glass of somethink short, to expel the cold? "

" Nothing, I thank you," responded Ramsey. " Pray make haste; there is no time to lose," he exclaimed, with an excitement which he could not restrain.

" We shall be ready in a jiffy," said the Big Beggarman; and he thereupon followed his daughter up the steep and narrow staircase which has already been described in a previous chapter.

CHAPTER XXXII

A SCENE ON THE THAMES

On gaining a room on the first floor, Carrotty Poll set down the light on a table; and, looking her father full in the face, she observed, in a low and sinister tone, " What do you mean to do with this swell cove? "

" Now, look here, my gal," was the answer, unhesitatingly given, " the genelman has got five hundred golden boys about him, and them golden boys we mean to have — eh? "

" That's certain," responded Carrotty Poll, her countenance glowing with delight up to the very verge of her flaming and disordered hair.

" Well, and a murder is to be done in order to get the money — eh? " continued the bloated ruffian.

" True again; but do go on, or he'll get tired of waiting and begin to suspect something," exclaimed Poll, with vixenish sharpness. " A murder must be committed, you say? "

" To be sure. And what does it matter to us which is put out of the way, this Ramsey or that baronet? Besides, it ain't worth while going all the way to Aylesbury to knock a fellow on the head for the purpose of getting five hundred guineas, when it can be done close by, on the river."

" I understand you, father," said the young woman. " But you and me can't do it alone. Some one must scull the boat."

" The Kinchin-Grand is in the public-room," answered the Big Beggarman; " and he shall come along with us."

" What! a mere boy, a youth of sixteen or seventeen? " ejaculated Carrotty Poll.

" He's a desperate fellow, and I know he'll serve our purpose," was the impatient response. " Come, give me my hat and rough coat, and put a pair of pistols in the pockets," he added, in a gruff whisper.

The woman obeyed these instructions without another remonstrance; and as soon as she had put on her cloak, which had a large hood to cover her head, — and also to conceal her features, when it was necessary to observe such mystery, — the father and daughter descended to the little parlour. Ramsey was waiting for them with an impatience that had become almost intolerable; and they all three issued forth from the crib behind the bar.

As they traversed the public-room, the Big Beggarman beckoned the Kinchin-Grand to join them; and this worthy chief — who, as it will be remembered, presided over the juvenile thieves that were wont to assemble at a certain flash house in Grub Street — forthwith abandoned his pipe and his pewter, and followed the party from the boozing-ken.

" Now, then, Bill," said the Big Beggarman when they had gained the street, " run and get the boat ready. We want to get across as quick as possible."

" All right! " exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand, who was somewhat more decently, or at all events, more warmly attired than when we first introduced him to our readers; and, having uttered that cheering ejaculation, he hurried on in front to obey the orders which he had received.

The Big Beggarman, Carrotty Poll, and Ramsey pursued their way in silence, the last-mentioned individual entertaining not the slightest suspicion of foul play on the part of his companions. In a few minutes they reached a place where a kind of low and narrow stone pier went shelving down from the bank of the Thames, until it was lost in the mud at low water, whereas at high tide it was completely covered. To a post fixed by the side of this convenience for landing or embarking, a large wherry was fastened; and the Kinchin-Grand was standing in the boat when the others made their appearance on the spot. The party entered the wherry and took their places, Ramsey being seated between the Beggarman and Carrotty Poll; and the Kinchin-Grand, having pushed off, betook himself to the oars, which he managed with remarkable expertness.

The wherry shot out from the bank, upon the black bosom of the Thames, which not the feeblest twinkling of moonbeam or starlight now relieved of its sombre gloom; but as the boat drew nearer to the middle of the river, the profile of its shores was marked by the feeble glimmerings which the windows of the houses on either side shed forth.

" Now, Bill," said the Beggarman, " run down the stream. The tide's with you, and you won't have to pull much."

" I understand," answered the youthful reprobate. " Where do you want to land? "

" Just below Execution Dock," was the answer.

There was something which sounded so ominous in this reply, that Ramsey shuddered from head to foot; and now it struck him for the first time that he was in company with three persons who, although one was a woman, were no doubt capable of any atrocity. That the Beggarman was as desperate a villain as any that London contained, he was well aware; that the daughter had not failed to imbibe the example of her sire, he naturally conjectured; and that the youth who rowed the wherry was of an equally vile stamp, the glimpse which he had obtained of his features in the public-room of the Beggar's Staff, when he was called upon to join the party, furnished pretty conclusive evidence.

All these reflections swept through the mind of Ramsey the instant that an alarm sprang up in his soul, and he repented of his rashness in trusting himself with such companions. There he was, completely at their mercy, in the midst of that silent highway where the voice that cried out for help could be stifled in a moment, and where a grave already yawned, as it were, to enshroud the corpse of a victim.

Commingling with these thoughts, too, were the horrible ideas so suddenly excited in his mind by the mention of the frightful name of Execution Dock, the place at which mutineers and all criminals whom the Courts of Admiralty doomed to death underwent the extreme sentence of the bloodthirsty laws. For Ramsey knew that he was implicated in crimes which, if detected, would send him to the scaffold; and it was, therefore, no wonder that he shuddered from head to foot as the ominous name of the proposed landing-place fell upon his ears.

" Are you certain of being enabled to find your friend Warren without delay? " he inquired, thus breaking a long silence which had prevailed since the Beggarman gave his orders to the Kinchin-Grand, and during which the boat had shot farther down the stream.

"Quite certain," was the answer, given in a tone which might have had nothing unusual in it, but which the increasing fears of Ramsey construed into a foreboding gruffness.

"And you think that he will consent to accompany us to Aylesbury to-night?" he asked, in that species of nervous humour which prompts men who entertain vague ideas of impending danger to converse with those at whose hands the peril is dreaded, in order to glean from their responses an assurance that such apprehensions are altogether unfounded.

"To be sure I do," answered the Big Beggarman. "Joe is not the feller to let a chance of sacking a good sum escape him."

"So much the better," exclaimed Ramsey, assuming a tone of cheerfulness, which he was, however, far from experiencing inwardly. "Shall we soon push in for the shore?"

"There's Execution Dock right ahead of you now," returned the Beggarman, extending his arm in the direction of the ominous spot. "But perhaps your eyes don't get accustomed to the darkness quite so soon as mine?"

"I can see something that appears to hang in the air," said Ramsey, straining all the powers of his vision in order to penetrate the obscurity which prevailed all around. "It is a black object, a thing darker than the darkness —"

"Well, and that's one of them scarecrows that mark Execution Dock at times," observed the Big Beggarman, with a rough, chuckling laugh, in which both his daughter and the Kinchin-Grand joined.

"A man hanging!" gasped Ramsey, as his excited imagination made the appalling object even more palpable than it really was, until the very features of the pendant corpse seemed to glare upon him with stony gaze through the darkness of the night.

"Yes, and why not?" exclaimed the Beggarman, with another coarse chuckle. "It's a pleasure to the aristocracy to hang up poor devils who haven't got any influential friends to beg 'em off. But I say, old feller," he continued, his tone experiencing a rapid and ominous change, as he laid his heavy hand rudely upon the shoulder of Ramsey, "you'd better give me that bag of guineas which you've got under your cloak."

"The guineas!" repeated the wretched man, a cold tremor passing over him and freezing the very blood in his veins.

"Oh, you hesitate, do you?" cried the Big Beggarman. "Now, Bill — keep the boat steady!" — and, thus speaking, he threw himself furiously upon Ramsey, whom he overpowered in an instant.

"Villain — miscreant — assassin!" almost screamed the desperate gentleman, as his cloak came off in the useless struggle which he endeavoured to renew against his burly opponent; but, having been thrown with his back across the seat, he was unable to offer any effectual resistance, the more especially as Carrotty Poll now lent her aid to her father.

"Steady the boat, Bill, or, by God! she'll capsize," thundered the Beggarman, for the wherry was oscillating frightfully. "Now, sir, give up that gold —"

"Never!" cried Ramsey, suddenly armed with the courage of despair; and, by an almost superhuman effort, he hurled the ruffian back, regaining his own feet instantly.

But Carrotty Poll, who was herself flung aside by this rapid movement on the part of the intended victim, had fallen upon his cloak, which lay on the seat; and her arm had encountered something which she felt to be the bag of gold. Plunging her hand into a pocket formed in the lining of the garment, she assured herself that such was the fact; and, in a shrill tone of exultation, she cried, "I've got it, father! Hold him — seize him!"

All this was the work of an instant, and the Big Beggarman, regaining his legs, rushed upon Ramsey, threw his arms forcibly around him, and endeavoured to hurl him into the water. But this was not so easily accomplished. It was a struggle for life on the part of the guilty lover of Lady Stamford, and his strength appeared to increase every moment. The boat swayed from side to side in a manner that threatened the entire party with instantaneous immersion, and the Kinchin-Grand, being compelled to steady it as well as he could with the oars, dared not leave his place.

"By God! we shall upset," exclaimed the Beggarman. "Come, Poll, lend a hand —"

"Miscreant! let me go — you may keep the money — you may have it all," cried Ramsey, in a voice of rending anguish; for he felt that his strength was failing him. "I implore you — I beseech you — mercy — mercy — "

"Bravo! Poll," ejaculated the Big Beggarman, as his daughter at that instant rendered effectual aid; and in another moment the herculean ruffian hurled the shrieking Ramsey over the side of the wherry into the river.

The boat rocked frightfully, as the murderer and murderess sank down into their seats to steady it; and the Kinchin-Grand, pulling long and vigorous strokes with the oars, made it shoot rapidly away from the spot where this awful deed had been perpetrated.

Then arose from the bosom of the dark water in the wake of the boat, the terrific cry of the drowning man's agony, — a cry which seemed to rend the very air, and which thrilled to the brains of the guilty wretches on whose ears it fell.

"Can you see anything, father?" demanded Carrotty Poll, she and her sire alike straining their eyes in the direction of the spot where Ramsey had now gone down a second time.

"Nothing — nothing: it's all up with him," returned the Big Beggarman, impatiently, for that appalling scream had done him harm, ruffian as he was. "Pull in to the shore, Bill, and quick about it."

"Which way — Execution Dock?" cried the young reprobate; and, without waiting for an answer, he sent the boat rapidly veering toward that point.

"No — back again — to Horslydown — damn you for a fool!" thundered the Big Beggarman, actually ferocious. "We don't mean to tell the Magsman anything about this affair at all," he added, more mildly.

"Well, don't play the bully, old feller, that's all," said the Kinchin-Grand, without losing his temper; and around went the wherry toward the opposite shore.

Silence now prevailed, and total darkness continued upon the scene, — a silence unbroken even by another cry on the part of the drowning man, and a darkness which seemed to grow more intense after the perpetration of that dread deed.

In a short time the wherry reached the stone pier whence it had started; and the Beggarman, Carrotty Poll, and the Kinchin-Grand retraced their steps to the boozing-ken, where the last-mentioned individual received fifty guineas as a recompense for his share in the evening's work, as well as to bribe him to the maintenance of strict silence respecting the dreadful transaction.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MEAGLES AND THE AMAZON AT THE BOOZING-KEN

Nearly two hours had elapsed since the return of the Big Beggarman, Carrotty Poll, and the Kinchin-Grand to the vile den in Horslydown, when the door of that place was thrown open, and Tim Meagles, accompanied by the Amazon, entered the horrible place.

For an instant the eyes of all the revellers present were turned upon Meagles, whose dashing, offhand appearance and frank, good-humoured countenance disposed them completely in his favour; but the next moment every look was riveted upon his companion, whose ample bust proclaimed her to be a woman, in spite of her masculine attire.

And well indeed might they gaze with admiration upon the huntress, for never had a more splendid creature burst upon their view. The cold night air had imparted the richest carnation glow to those cheeks that looked so firm and soft; and her fine large dark eyes, so clear and bright, seemed to swim in a living lustre. The black brows, well divided and rather full than thin, set off the stainless white on her high and noble forehead; her coral lips, on which a good-tempered smile was playing, half-revealed the pearly teeth; and her luxuriant hair, dark as night, and glossy as the raven's wing, showered in a myriad curls upon her shoulders. Then her bearing was so graceful and elegant, the garb which she wore so admirably became her symmetrical form, and her shape was characterized by so much unrestrained lightness, that she was all which one might expect to meet in a daring huntress who was likewise a charming woman.

Such a character was well calculated to win the admiration of the men, and even of the women, who were assembled at the Beggar's Staff; and a murmur of gratification and delight pervaded all parts of the dingy room as the lovely Amazon paused to take a survey of the scene. But that feeling which her presence had immediately engendered rose into absolute enthusiasm when, taking three or four guineas from her purse, she unaffectedly tossed them upon the bar, bidding Carrotty Poll supply liquor to the amount, that the company might have the wherewith to enjoy themselves more fully than they were already doing.

Having thus obeyed the first impulse of a disposition naturally generous, Letitia followed Tim Meagles behind the bar; and in a few moments the lady and her companion were closeted with the Big Beggarman in the little parlour.

" You recollect us, my good fellow, don't you? " said Meagles, as soon as the burly landlord had closed the door of the crib.

" Yes, perfectly," was the reply. " You came here, both of you, about six or seven months ago, as near as I can remember, to see the Magsman about a certain paper in old Lightfoot's possession. I know all about it, and I likewise know who you are. You're Mr. Meagles, sir, and you're Lady Lade, ma'am," added the ruffian, with a low bow to the former, and a much lower one to the latter.

" You have a good memory," said the Amazon, laughing. " But we are desirous of seeing your friend Warren, and it is about that very same business, too. Is he here to-night? "

" No, my lady, he's not," answered the Beggarman; " and he isn't expected to return till to-morrow, neither. He's over the water, at t'other house — "

" We called there in the first instance this evening," interrupted Meagles, " and he had left, without telling the man Briggs where he was going. That made us come across the river, to the Beggar's Staff; and we should have been here upwards of two hours ago, if it had not been for a little incident which delayed us. But, however," continued Meagles, " it is growing late, and we will not waste time. You know all about the business which brought us hither on the previous occasion of our visiting the Beggar's Staff, and you can perhaps give us some necessary information now."

" Anything that I can do to serve you, sir, shall be done cheerfully," responded the Big Beggarman, well aware that he was dealing with a good paymaster.

"You already know that we came here the last time, which was six or seven months ago, about a certain paper in Lightfoot's possession," resumed Meagles; "and on that occasion your friend Warren made an appointment for us to meet him at the old man's next day. This appointment we kept; but it led to no good. Lady Letitia subsequently wrote Warren a long letter, containing particular explanations and instructions, and to this letter no answer was ever returned."

"Well, I'm surprised at the Magsman's want of attention in that respect," exclaimed the Big Beggarman, assuming as much politeness as his uncouth nature could possibly permit, "for there was something of importance to communicate, nevertheless. But I suppose that other business turned up suddenly, and he must have put off writing from time to time till he forgot it."

"And what was the subject of importance?" demanded Meagles.

"Why, the letter which her ladyship wrote, and which I saw," continued the Beggarman, "hinted at foul means to obtain the paper. Well, Lord bless you! that very same night that the letter came, me, the Magsman, and Briggs, got into old Lightfoot's crib, and tried to make him surrender the dokiment. But it was no go, and there the matter ended. But the Magsman ought to have reported it in due course."

"And is Lightfoot still dwelling in the same place?" asked the Amazon.

"God bless your sweet eyes!" ejaculated the Beggarman, "he's dead!"

"Dead!" exclaimed both Meagles and the huntress, as if it were in the same breath.

"Yes, he died three or four nights ago," returned the villain, "and his gal has bolted. So I suppose she's taken the papers and everything else with her, leaving the parish, most likely, to bury her old father, for I'm blessed if anybody else will."

"Then our hopes are defeated in that quarter," said Meagles, in a tone of vexation. "It was odd that Briggs told us nothing about his death."

" The man did not know the nature of our business," observed Lady Letitia. " We never spoke to him before in our lives; and it was only in consequence of what Warren told us last June or July — or whenever it might have been — that we were even aware of the fellow's name. We were desired, when we wanted to see Warren, to make inquiries of Briggs or else at this place."

" Just so, my lady," said the Beggarman. " Briggs is as cautious a chap as here and there one."

" But perhaps there is some way of tracing old Lightfoot's daughter," exclaimed Meagles, the thought suddenly striking him.

" We'll endeavour to do so, sir," returned the Big Beggarman; " and if we hear anything we'll let you know. I s'pose a letter, written in the inwisible ink, the secret of which you bought of the Magsman, will always reach your ladyship in safety? "

" Oh, certainly," replied the Amazon. " But the address must not be invisible also," she added, laughing.

" I should rayther think not, ma'am," responded the burly villain.

" Well, you will make inquiries after Lightfoot's daughter, will you? " said Meagles, tossing down five guineas upon the table as an earnest of future recompense. " Now, Letitia," he continued, turning toward his beautiful companion, " we will take our departure; and I hope we shall not have to encounter any more adventures such as the one which detained us just now."

" Was it so very unpleasant, sir? " asked the Beggarman, merely by way of making an observation which he fancied to be polite, and not through any sentiment of curiosity, much less on account of any suspicion of the real nature of that adventure.

" I will tell you," said Meagles. " You know already that her ladyship and myself called in the first instance this evening at the house in Shadwell or Wapping, wherever it may be. Well, not finding the Magsman there, as we have likewise already explained to you, we cut across to the stairs at Execution Dock, to take a boat — "

" Ah! an ugly place, that! " exclaimed the Beggarman, suddenly becoming interested in the tale.

" Yes, it is indeed," responded Meagles; " and there's a body suspended in chains to a gibbet on the point of land, at this very moment," he added. " It was positively gloomy and dispiriting even to me and my harum-scarum friend here to listen to the dreadful creaking of the irons as the corpse swung to and fro. But, however, we took a wherry, and were crossing the river, through a darkness so intense that it was something like the one which fell upon Egypt — I mean it might be felt — "

" Well, sir, — well? " interrupted the Big Beggarman, impatiently, for he was now still more interested in the narrative, and suspicions of what was coming were rising rapidly and fearfully up in his mind.

" The waterman had scarcely pushed off the boat," continued Meagles, " when a terrific scream, apparently coming from the middle of the river, met our ears."

" And, oh, such a scream! I shall never forget it as long as I live! " exclaimed the Amazon, shuddering visibly. " It still tingles in my ears."

" It must have been very unpleasant," said the Beggarman, in whose ears that scream likewise tingled. " But pray go on, sir; you — you interest me."

" Well, it immediately struck us that it must be a man either drowning or being murdered," resumed Meagles.

" Murdered! — what made you think that? " demanded the ruffian, hastily.

" Oh, you may well shudder at it, my good friend," said Meagles, " for, my God! if you had heard that awful, rending, piercing scream of dying agony, you would never forget it. I ordered the waterman to pull with all his might, though I was fearful that no good could be done in the pitchy darkness."

" And did you — did you — see anything? " asked the Beggarman, scarcely able to hide the trouble which now filled his guilty soul.

" Egad! " exclaimed Meagles, " it was scarcely possible to see your hand at a distance of six inches from your face, although, by the bye, we could see the gibbet and the body through the darkness; but, somehow or another, those things are never completely hidden, even in the blackest night. There seems to be a Providence in all that! "

" Dear me, Tim, how you are wandering! " cried the Amazon; " and here is the worthy landlord all impatience to hear the rest of your story. But I will tell it myself. You must know, then," she continued, addressing herself to the Big Beggarman, "that the waterman who rowed us pulled manfully, and Mr. Meagles leaned over the gunwale on one side, while I did the same on the other. All of a sudden I saw something white, yes, absolutely white, through the deep darkness. It appeared abruptly — quick as the eye winks — close by my side of the wherry; and simultaneously as I caught sight of it, I beheld enough to carry the rapid conviction to my mind that it was a human countenance."

"The devil it was!" ejaculated the Big Beggarman, summoning all his self-possession to his aid, while his guilty soul was quaking at the prospect of discovery.

"Yes, it was a human countenance," repeated the Amazon, emphatically. "With the speed of thought, I mechanically stretched out my arm, and my hand clutched the hair upon the unfortunate man's head."

"And you saved him?" cried the bloated ruffian, with terrific impatience, which Meagles and the Amazon, however, believed to arise from a feeling of humanity prompting the hope that a fellow creature was really rescued from a watery grave.

"Mr. Meagles instantly turned to assist me, the waterman likewise lent a hand, and we succeeded in dragging the unfortunate individual into the boat," continued Lady Letitia; "but it was at the risk of our own lives, for the wherry was as nearly as possible being upset by the proceeding."

"And did he speak? Did he say anything?" demanded the guilty ruffian, his fears becoming every instant more appalling.

"He was senseless, and we thought that life must be extinct," replied the huntress. "But we bade the waterman pull back to Execution Dock as quickly as he could, and during the few minutes which thus elapsed, Mr. Meagles rubbed the poor gentleman's hands briskly between his own, while I chafed his temples. By the time the wherry reached the stairs again, we had the satisfaction of knowing that the vital spark was still flickering."

"Ah! a very pleasant satisfaction," observed the Big Beggarman, who could have killed the Amazon and Tim Meagles both, then and there, for what he considered to be their "cursed officiousness" in endeavouring to restore Philip Ramsey to life. "And pray, my lady, what did you do next?" he inquired, still maintaining as much outward composure as possible.

"We landed, and bore the gentleman to the nearest public-house — "

"The Mariners' Arms, I'll be bound?" exclaimed the Beggarman.

"Yes, that was the sign; for the name is painted on the lamp," said Meagles.

"Well, we had our unfortunate charge, who was still senseless, conveyed to a chamber," continued Lady Letitia Lade; "and while Meagles and the landlord stripped and put him to bed, I myself ran for the nearest surgeon, whom I speedily found, although perfectly ignorant of that precious neighbourhood."

"And then, I suppose, the doctor pretty soon recovered the genelman?" observed the ruffian.

"By the time I returned, accompanied by the medical man, the patient was already so far recalled to his senses that he was conscious of the attentions which were being ministered," answered the huntress; "but he was still utterly unable to speak, and the doctor said that many hours might elapse before he would regain sufficient strength to enable him to utter a word."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Big Beggarman, much relieved. "What sort of a looking fellow was he, my lady?" he inquired, although entertaining scarcely any doubt of the identity of this gentleman with Philip Ramsey.

"Tall, handsome, genteel," replied Meagles; "slightly made, and not thirty years old yet, I should think. Poor gentleman! it will have been a narrow escape indeed, even if he should ultimately recover."

"Is there any danger still, then?" demanded the Big Beggarman, hastily.

"Of course there is," responded Meagles; "but the doctor seemed to think he would get over it. However, Lady Letitia and myself did all we could for him, and, come what may, we have nothing to reproach ourselves for. He had but little money in his pockets, and we therefore left sufficient with the landlord of the tavern for present purposes, until we call to inquire after him again."

" Then you don't know who the gentleman is? " said the Beggarman.

" There was not a paper, nor a card, nor any document whatever about his person to afford the slightest clue to his name or abode," answered Tim Meagles; " but his dress and appearance bespoke him to be a gentleman."

" Well, the adwentur' was a singular one," observed the Big Beggarman, who, during the latter part of this conversation, had been revolving a certain scheme in his head; for this rescue and resuscitation of Ramsey seemed to menace the villain with serious peril. " But won't you take some little refreshment, sir, and you, my lady, after the fatigues you've both gone through this cold night? "

" Nothing, I thank you," answered Meagles. " Come, Letitia, we will depart."

The Beggarman affected to open the door officiously, but, instantly turning back again toward the huntress and her companion, he exclaimed, " Well, this is fortunate! There's Joe Warren just come in, and he's gone up by a private way to his own room."

" We may as well see him, in that case," said Meagles, pleased at the intelligence thus abruptly conveyed.

" To be sure," observed the Amazon. " Perhaps he may suggest some scheme which may put us upon the track of Lightfoot's daughter."

" No doubt of it, my lady," returned the Beggarman. " This way, if you please."

As he uttered these words, the ruffian took the candle in his hand, and conducted his visitors up the steep and narrow staircase which has been already described. Continuing the ascent until they reached the loft, the party proceeded in silence; but when the Beggarman removed the straw and raised the trap-door, Meagles exclaimed, " What! have we only come up to this height for the purpose of going down again? "

" Our friend Joe Warren likes to have his private chamber made all safe and secure," answered the Big Beggarman, with a chuckling laugh; " 'cause why, there's a reward offered for his apprehension, and the constables know he frequents this house at times. Indeed, if I couldn't rely upon you, Mr. Meagles, and on her ladyship, I shouldn't be ass enough to let you both into the secrets of my crib."

" You have nothing to fear from us, my good fellow," said Meagles.

" Oh, I am well assured of that, sir! " exclaimed the Beggarman, in an assumed tone of hearty confidence. " Please to follow me down these steps, and in a few moments you'll be with Warren."

Meagles and the Amazon unhesitatingly complied with this invitation; and at the bottom of the stairs, the Beggarman, throwing open a door, stood aside to allow them to enter the chamber. They crossed the threshold; and as the light of the candle, which the Beggarman held high up, did not reveal to them the presence of the person whom they expected to meet, they simultaneously turned looks of inquiry upon the ruffian. But the door was instantaneously closed with violence, and they heard the strong bolts shooting into their sockets on the outer side. In another moment the heavy steps of the Beggarman, ascending the stairs, fell upon their ears, and then all was silent!

" We are betrayed, Tim! " exclaimed the Amazon, grasping her companion's arm at hazard in the midst of the deep darkness which pervaded the room.

" It seems so, my beauty," returned Meagles. " But cheer up, and the devil's in it if we're not a match for this scoundrel in the long run."

CHAPTER XXXIV

ANOTHER DARK PLOT — A DARING ADVENTURE

On descending into his little parlour, after perpetrating this deed of treachery, the Big Beggarman hastily summoned his daughter from the bar; and, closing the door, he communicated to her all that had taken place.

Carrotty Poll was at first sorely troubled when she learned that Ramsey had not only been rescued from a watery grave, but was likely to recover altogether; and she impatiently inquired of her father what he proposed to do.

"The business is awkward, very awkward," said the Beggarman; "but my mind is made up to a particular course, if so be you've pluck enough to help me."

"I will do anything, provided I see the utility of it," answered the vile young woman. "But, after all, what have we to dread from this Ramsey? He dares not peach against us. We can tell things of him that would send him to Tuck-up Fair, can't we? Didn't he do as much as admit that he and Martin had committed the numerous forgeries of which Sir Richard Stamford is accused? and then didn't he pass off all the spurious coin? Really, father, I don't see, when we come to look well at the matter, that there's so much to fear."

"There's everything to fear, I tell you," said the Big Beggarman, savagely. "Don't I know what natur' is? And suppose that Ramsey shouldn't survive this night's business, but just recover his senses sufficient to peach, isn't there a chance of his repenting on his death-bed of his own sins, and confessing everything to some humbug of a parson? Then out would come all about the spurious coin, the carrying off of Sir Richard Stamford, and this precious evening's affair; and where should we be? Why, in the Stone Jug before we could look around us."

"That's true enough," observed Carrotty Poll, struck by the soundness of her father's reasoning.

"And then, again," continued the Beggarman, "supposing that Ramsey should recover altogether, wouldn't he be sure to tell the Magsman how we served him out? And there isn't a more vindictive fellow in all the world than Joe Warren. If he went to the gallows himself along with us, he'd take us there out of pure revenge. And even if he didn't, he'd cut us for ever, and we can't very well do without him. Then there's another point to be considered," added the herculean ruffian, thus rapidly surveying every feature of the emergency in which he and his daughter were placed. "This Tim Meagles and Lady Lade will go and see Ramsey to-morrow, and they will perhaps fish out of him all that has happened; and though they wouldn't very well dare to tell a magistrate, seeing that they have been mixed up with us in this business of trying to get old Lightfoot's papers, still they would be sure to tell the Magsman, — and there we are floored again."

"What do you propose to do, then?" demanded Poll, crossing her thin freckled arms across her scraggy breast.

"I propose to keep Meagles and her ladyship here until to-morrow night," answered the Big Beggarman; "and in the meantime — "

"In the meantime the Magsman may come and want his room," interrupted Poll, sharply.

"I can stall him off for a day or two, my dear," observed her father. "Won't it be easy to tell him that Grumley and his men have been seen lurking about the neighbourhood?"

"Well, go on. What next?" demanded the red-haired young woman.

"You must tog yourself off in your best clothes without a moment's delay," said the Beggarman; "and you must cross the river as soon as possible. Ramsey is lying at the Mariners' Arms, and you ain't known there. You'll pretend to be his sister, or wife, or cousin, or anything you like; and you'll say that, having missed your unfortunate husband or relative, as the case may be, you made inquiries, and was horror-struck to hear that a genelman answering his description had been fished out of the Thames this evening. You can hint that he's touched here," continued the Beggarman, tapping his forehead significantly; "and that you suppose he attempted to commit suicide in a fit of madness."

"I understand," exclaimed Poll. "Go on."

"Well, of course you'll be dreadfully afflicted, and the people at the Mariners' Arms will feel very much for you. You'll insist on passing the night by the bedside of the dear man," continued the astute villain; "and you'll have to force gruel, brandy and water, and what not, down his throat. Of course you'll be alone with him — and a good dose of the Heir's Friend will put him out of the way altogether," added the Big Beggarman, sinking his voice to the lowest audible whisper, while his hideous countenance expressed all the diabolical significancy of his dark design. "Now do you see my meaning, old gal?"

"I do," answered Carrotty Poll, in an equally subdued and sombre tone. "Anything more?"

"To be sure!" resumed the miscreant, experiencing an infernal satisfaction at the evident approval which his project met at the hands of his daughter. "Toward morning you'll alarm the whole house with your dreadful shrieks; the landlord and landlady will go rushing in, and your poor dear husband or brother will be no more. The doctor will be sent for; all attempts to restore him will be useless. He'll hem and hah — 'consequences of immersion in water,' and so forth; and then, for family reasons, you would raything there shouldn't be a inquest. A five-pound note will hush up the affair. You get a shell to-morrow, he's put in it, you take him away to Briggs's and before night he's underground. Meagles and Lady Letitia may then go and inquire after him as much as they choose."

"But what excuse shall you make for having locked 'em up till to-morrow night?" demanded Poll.

"Why, they can't possibly couple my conduct toward them with this affair of Ramsey," answered the Big Beggarman; "because they don't suspect that you or I had anything to do with it. In fact, they don't know who the man is, nor whether he came in the water by foul play, or accident, or of his own accord. I shall therefore tell them that there was something in their manner I didn't like; I thought it looked suspicious, and I was fearful they were laying a plant to catch the Magsman for some reason or another. I'll have a conversation with them to-morrow night on the subject, and then pretend to be convinced by their arguments that they meant really nothing but what was straightfor'ard and fair. Oh, leave me to deal with them. You play your part well, and we shall get out of this scrape as nice as ninepence."

"Very good," observed Poll. "I'll go up and dress at once."

"And mind you disguise yourself as much as possible," said the Beggarman.

"Never fear," was the response. "Tell the Kinchin-Grand not to go away, as I shall want him to take me over in the wherry."

"All right!" exclaimed her father; and, opening the door, he stepped into the bar, while his delectable daughter hastened up-stairs to arrange her toilet.

In half an hour she descended again into the little parlour; and the Beggarman, observing that she was there, went in to satisfy himself that her disguise was sufficient. He had not the slightest fault to find. Her hair was dyed a deep colour, and was carefully arranged in bands; her complexion was darkened to an olive hue; her very eyebrows and lashes were stained black. She was well dressed, — largely padded, so as to create an artificial fulness and plumpness which she did not naturally possess, — and, in fine, had effected such a complete transformation in her appearance that her own father would not have know her if they had met accidentally in the street, and if he had never seen her accomplish the same change before.

"That will do splendidly!" exclaimed the ruffian, his countenance expanding into a grin of delight. "Have you got the — you know what?"

"The phial is here," she answered, significantly tapping the wadded bosom of her silk gown. "Now, help me on with my cloak, and put up my hood in such a way that it sha'n't tumble my hair. Those people in the public-room mustn't see that I am going out such a swell at this time of night; neither must they notice that I'm so changed and pranked up. There — that's right. Now, is the Kinchin-Grand ready?"

"He's gone down to wait for you at the pier," answered the Big Beggarman. "I thought it was better that he should not be seen following you again, as he went out with us in the early part of the evening."

"Good," observed the woman; and, having received some money of her father, she quitted the boozing-ken, her head being so completely concealed in the hood of her cloak that no one noticed the altered appearance of her features.

The Big Beggarman then sat down in the bar, to smoke his pipe and drink his hot brandy and water, while the seedy waiter dispensed the liquors to the various revellers.

We must now return to Meagles and Lady Letitia Lade, whom we left at the moment when they found themselves locked in the chamber whither they had been allured under the false hope of meeting Joe the Magsman.

"It is easy enough to tell me to cheer up, Tim," said the Amazon, in answer to the observation which her companion made, and which we recorded at the end of the preceding chapter; "but I really can find little to be cheerful for. Nevertheless, I am not going to cry, nor yet yield to despair. What do you think is the meaning of all this?"

"I can begin to read the matter — dimly, it is true," replied Meagles, in a subdued whisper; "but still I can see a glimmering which promises to lighten the darkness enveloping this treachery."

"And what are your suspicions?" inquired the huntress, as she leaned upon his arm.

"Did you observe nothing peculiar in the ruffian's manner when we were telling him the story about the rescue of that gentleman from the water?" said Meagles.

"It struck me once or twice that his remarks were singular, and that he even appeared troubled," returned Lady Letitia; "but I fancied that he was experiencing a deep interest in the narrative.

"Such was the construction which I put upon his words and conduct at the time," said Meagles; "but now that I begin to reflect seriously upon it all, I am convinced that the fellow was in some way or another connected with the affair of that gentleman. He asked so many questions, and seemed so anxious to glean every particular, that the thing looks very suspicious; and you may depend upon it, we should never have experienced this treachery or been thus ensnared if we had not told the scoundrel the story of our adventure."

"It was certainly ridiculous on our part to imagine that such a man could feel any really humane interest in the matter," observed the Amazon. "But if he be capable of murdering or endeavouring to murder one person," she added, with a shudder, "he is not likely to be very particular how he deals with others."

"I do not for a moment apprehend that the villain entertains any such black design in respect to us, my dear Letitia," said Meagles, passing his arm around the lady's waist and pressing her to him. "But rely upon it, that not a hair of your head shall be hurt while life remains in my body."

"Oh, I am well assured of that, dear Tim," she replied, caressing him tenderly. "Moreover, although I am but a poor weak woman, I possess the spirit and daring of a man; and my own existence would not be sold without a desperate struggle."

"It may suit the fellow's purpose to keep us prisoners here for some hours — perhaps even days," observed Meagles; "but we will try and defeat him. Now, my beauty," he added, whispering softly in his fair companion's ear, "let us see whether we cannot effect our escape. The adventure will be a pleasant one — eh?"

"Delightful, Tim!" responded the Amazon, her glowing bosom palpitating against his breast with the excitement of the idea. "But how shall we proceed? It is as dark as pitch, and we cannot even obtain a glimpse of anything in the room."

"There is a window somewhere in this direction," said Meagles, groping his way cautiously. "I saw enough of the chamber during the few moments that the ruffian held the light at the door to observe its principal features. Ah! here it is!"

He drew aside the curtain which covered the small casement; and the room was just so much relieved of its black darkness as to enable the two friends to trace the outlines of each other's form, without, however, distinguishing a feature of the countenance.

"Now let us find a chair, my beauty," said Meagles; "and you shall sit on my knee for a few minutes, while we hold a council of war. There — that's right. Now give me a kiss, and we will begin our discussion. Good!" he exclaimed, when the Amazon had withdrawn her moist lips from his own. "In the first place, let us reflect in which part of the house we are located."

"This window must look out at the back," said Letitia, who was seated on Meagles's knee, with one arm around his neck. "Of that I am confident, judging by the situation of the staircases which we mounted and the turnings we took."

"Yes, you are right enough," observed her companion, after a few moments' reflection. "The next point to consider is, on which floor are we? The house is not a high one — that we know, as we have seen it from the outside. We ascended two flights of stairs, and that loft which we entered may be called the second story. Well, then we descended again to this crib, and consequently we are on the first floor. Now, having ascertained so important a point, it remains to be determined whether we can escape from the window. Let us see if it is protected by bars."

Meagles rose, and cautiously opened the casement. There was no ironwork to prevent an egress in that direction; but when he looked forth and endeavoured to penetrate the intense darkness without, he could not possibly discover how deep the yard lay below. That there was a yard, or some such enclosure at the back of the premises, he, however, felt convinced; because the adjacent buildings hemmed in with their black walls a small square open space.

But it did not at all follow that this yard must be upon the same level with the street. There might be underground kitchens belonging to the premises; in which case the yard would be a dozen feet, or even more, lower than the ground in front of the house. The object, then, was to form a rope long enough to meet this contingency.

Having carefully discussed all the chances for and against them, Tim Meagles and the Amazon resolved to undertake the adventure. Once let them get down into the yard, and they were resolved to arm themselves with anything they could convert into weapons of defence, and then endeavour to fight their way through all opposition which might present itself. There was also the probability of the existence of some outlet from the back part of the premises; in which case they would be spared the necessity of attempting to force their way through the house. At any rate, they were determined to risk the venture: and, if they failed, they could but be made captives again.

"Now, my Amazonian confederate," said Tim Meagles, gaily, "let us see whether the bed will furnish us with materials sufficient for our purpose: otherwise all our fine schemes melt into the air at once."

Groping their way in the dark to the alcove in which the bed stood, they speedily satisfied themselves that the sheets, the blankets, and the coverlid were all there, and to work they went. Meagles had a clasp-knife with him; and the articles of bedding just enumerated were soon cut into halves. They then twisted the pieces, and fastened them together: and, having calculated the greatest height which the window could possibly be from the yard below, they found that the rope thus manufactured was amply long enough. But to make sure doubly sure, they likewise cut the carpet into strips, which they plaited together, and then attached this supplementary piece to the rest.

Having accomplished this important incident in their proceedings, Tim Meagles and his heroic assistant removed the bed close up to the window, in order that there should be some solid object unto which they might fasten one end of the rope.

"Now, Letitia dear, I shall descend first," said Tim, "and then I can steady the rope for you."

"No, I am lighter than you," observed the huntress, emphatically, "and I will go first."

"But for the very reason that you are so much lighter, my darling," exclaimed Meagles, "the rope will oscillate all the more dangerously. In a word, I insist upon descending before you, or I abandon the attempt at once."

"Well, have your own way, you wilful fellow," said the Amazon. "But kiss me first, and then away with you."

Meagles embraced his heroic companion; and then, disengaging himself from her arms, — for during a few moments she clung to him as if entertaining a presentiment that some dreadful accident was about to happen to him, — the intrepid Tim passed himself, limbs foremost, out of the window.

Courageous as Lady Letitia naturally was, she shuddered and felt sick at heart as she beheld her paramour clinging to the rope outside the casement; but a few reassuring words which he conveyed to her in a subdued whisper relieved her of the apprehensions which had struck a chill to her heart, and a glowing excitement sprang up in her bosom.

She looked forth from the window; but when Meagles had descended a few feet, his form became absorbed in the utter darkness which prevailed, and the Amazon, with suspended breath and upheaved bosom, listened to assure herself that he was performing the perilous journey in safety. She likewise kept her hands upon the rope to feel if it continued to maintain that tightness of tension which the weight of Meagles imparted to it; and thus two minutes dragged their slow length along.

But at the expiration of that time the rope became suddenly loose in her grasp; and immediately afterward it was shaken from beneath, the serpentine motion thus given to it undulating up to the very extremity where it was attached to the heavy bedstead. Then the Amazon knew that Meagles had descended in safety, and that the coast was clear below; and, animated with a still more fervid excitement than before, — for she entertained no fears on her own account, — the brave woman committed herself to the rudely formed rope.

Meagles held it firmly in the yard beneath, and likewise kept it at a convenient distance from the wall of the house; the task, so far as it regarded the adventurous lady, was therefore much facilitated.

And now, with her delicate hands grasping the twisted sheet and blanket, and with her legs clutching it also, the Amazon gradually lowered herself, each knot in the rope tempering the rapidity of her descent, until she reached the bottom in safety, and was caught in the arms of the delighted Tim Meagles.

Well, indeed, was it for them that they had made their rope of such a length; for the yard was far below the level of the street on which the front of the house looked.

Not a moment was now to be lost. The sounds of uproarious revelry reached their ears from the public-room, and warned them that they had still much to contend against, unless there were an outlet from that yard otherwise than through the house. But a few moments' rapid investigation convinced them that there was not; and no alternative remained but to adopt their original resolution of forcing their way into the street.

A low window, apparently belonging to a kitchen, looked into the yard; and as no light shone forth, they concluded that the place was unoccupied at the moment. Thither they accordingly penetrated; and, their conjecture as to the nature of the room being correct, they provided themselves with the fire-irons as weapons of defence. Meagles then led the way up a narrow and dark flight of stairs, with a formidable shovel in his hand, while the Amazon followed, wielding a huge poker.

Slowly and noiselessly did they proceed, until a door at the top of the steps barred their passage; and the close vicinity of shouts and laughter informed them that this door led direct into the public-room.

" The moment I open," said Meagles to the Amazon, in a whisper only just audible, " do you spring into the apartment and make for the street. Attempt not to look behind you. Don't waste a thought upon me; every instant will be precious. We have got thus far, and we will not spoil the adventure by any folly on our part."

" I am ready," responded the Amazon, grasping the fire-iron firmly.

The door flew open, and she darted into the room. Meagles was close behind her, and their sudden appearance, armed as they were, made all the revellers leap from their seats and crowd around them in an instant.

" Let us pass, good people! " exclaimed Meagles, raising his formidable weapon over his head, and sweeping the host of villainous faces with his menacing looks.

" Stop them! " thundered the Big Beggarman, rushing from behind the bar; and, elbowing his way with marvellous rapidity through the group, he laid a violent grasp upon the collar of the Amazon's coat.

Without an instant's hesitation the heroic lady felled the ruffian with a tremendous blow dealt by the heavy poker, and the Big Beggarman lay senseless at her feet.

" Serve him right! " ejaculated a dozen voices.

" She has got a noble spirit of her own! " cried one, following up the cry.

" She treated us just now like a princess, as she is," vociferated another.

" And I will treat you again, good people, if you will aid us to escape from the clutches of that treacherous villain," cried Lady Letitia, pointing indignantly down at the Beggarman. Then, at the next moment, she drew out her purse and showered its glittering contents amongst the delighted men and women gathered around.

An instantaneous scramble took place, and Meagles, seizing Letitia by the hand, led her hurriedly forth from the vile den. Not a finger was raised to bar their passage; they gained the street in safety, and, on pausing for a moment at the end of Horslydown to listen, they could hear the enthusiastic shouts of the motley company in the boozing-ken, but not a footstep in pursuit.

Throwing away their weapons, they exchanged hasty syllables of congratulation at this successful adventure, and plunged hand in hand into the maze of streets lying between Horslydown and the vicinity of London Bridge.

In half an hour they reached the main thoroughfare in Southwark; and thence they took a hackney-coach to Meagles's lodgings in Jermyn Street, where they arrived shortly after one o'clock in the morning. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate, a good cold supper was spread upon the table, and the two friends speedily indemnified themselves for the fatigues, annoyances, and perils they had encountered during the past five or six hours. They then retired to repose in each other's arms, it being too late for the Amazon to return to her own dwelling.

CHAPTER XXXV

CARROTTY POLL'S RETURN TO THE BOOZING-KEN

When Lady Letitia Lade emptied her purse amongst the revellers at the Beggar's Staff, there was such a scramble for the gold and silver thus lavishly poured forth that not a soul thought of rendering assistance to the Big Beggarman, who lay senseless on the floor, stunned by the blow the Amazon had so effectually dealt him. And all the while the men and women were employed in picking up and searching for the coin, they vociferated the most enthusiastic cries in praise of the generosity of the beautiful huntress.

At length an old crone, who had succeeded in securing a guinea as her share of the bounteous gift, took compassion upon the burly landlord; and the waiter, having likewise profited by the scramble, now proceeded in a leisurely manner to lend his aid. Some water was sprinkled upon the ruffian's countenance, some brandy was poured down his throat, and in a short time he opened his eyes.

His senses were, however, slow in resuming their empire, for the chastisement he had received was severe; and when at last he was enabled to collect his scattered ideas, and exercise the powers of his memory, he broke out into the most diabolical imprecations against the whole company for having allowed Meagles and Lady Lade to escape. This proceeding on his part only provoked the laughter, jeers, and low witticisms of those whom he thus reviled; but his wrath was somewhat appeased on learning that the Amazon had showered gold and silver in profusion amongst the crew, for the greedy ruffian was well aware that the larger portion thereof would find its way into his till ere sunrise.

A strong glass of hot brandy and water, the alcoholic spirit preponderating in quantity over the elementary fluid, restored the Big Beggarman pretty well to his ordinary humour; but he still experienced a racking pain in the head. Being curious to discover how his late captives could possibly have made their escape, he ascended to the chamber where he had imprisoned them; and the bed dragged up to the window, the open casement, the absence of all the sheets, blankets, and coverlid, as well as the very carpet, and then the rope itself, rapidly developed to his amazed comprehension the desperate means which had been adopted by Meagles and the Amazon to emancipate themselves from confinement at the Beggar's Staff.

Atrocious villain though he were, and savage as he felt at the circumstances of this escape, he could not help admiring the courage which the incident displayed on the part of the fugitives.

Retracing his way to the bar, he described all he had seen to the company present, for they already knew quite enough to render it unnecessary to keep from them the most wonderful episode in the history of the escape; and those who heard him soon became too much absorbed in the interest of the details which he thus gave them, to find leisure to question him as to his original motives for imprisoning Meagles and the lady at all.

Vociferous was the applause with which the health of the daring couple was proposed and drunk; and the orgy was continued in a manner well suiting the vile place and well worthy of the vagabonds, thieves, prostitutes, and hideous wretches assembled there.

Are there such houses, and are there such people, in London at the present day? This is a question which many of our readers will ask themselves and each other. The reply is a bold affirmative, for most assuredly there are. And whose fault is it? That of the government and the legislature.

Yes, it is the fault of our rulers that the noxious weeds of vice and demoralization flourish in such luxuriant rankness as they do. What do your lords and baronets know of the poorer classes? What notion can they possibly have of the causes of that terrible depravity which exists, in such widely spread and intricate ramifications, amongst those whom they denominate the lower orders? They make grand speeches upon the immorality of the millions, and they taunt the victims of vice with their profligacy; but they do nothing, absolutely nothing, to establish a remedy. It is monstrous and absurd to take an aristocrat and make him a minister. He naturally labours only to aggrandize the order to which he belongs, and he utterly neglects the people. Thus the millions are inevitably sacrificed to a wealthy, despotic, and luxurious oligarchy.

Let a minister be taken from the people, — a man who knows what the people are, who has made himself acquainted with all the miseries of the poorer classes, and who understands the springs and causes of that demoralization which fills the low boozing-kens with revellers, and furnishes so many victims to the scaffold, the penal settlement, the hulks, and the gaol, ay, and so many prostitutes to the streets. Such a man would be well aware how to grapple with the evil. He knows that poverty, and nothing but poverty, is the origin of the tremendous mischief which exists as a shame and a scandal in that country so falsely called Free and Civilized England.

And what causes this poverty, this penury, this destitution which renders intolerable the lives of millions in a country naturally possessing, in the resources of its soil and the enterprise of its sons, every element of a consummate prosperity? It is the fact that all the wealth is held in the possession of a few; it is the abhorrent anomaly that where one has plenty, a thousand are starving; where one counts his money by hundreds of pounds, a million count theirs by pence! The iniquitous laws of primogeniture and entail, the absence of any statute to regulate the accumulation of capital, the awful monopoly which capital so accumulated constitutes, and the tremendous tyranny which it engenders, — these are the springs of that pauperism which sits like an incubus upon the bosom of fair Britannia.

Oh, deplorable, heartrending, and shocking is it to contemplate the misery in which the toiling, industrious millions of these islands exist! "Death from starvation" — this is a common verdict returned by coroners' juries in this country. Will ye believe it, O glorious people of France? Will ye believe it, O enviable people of the United States of America?

Our sickly sentimentalists and maudlin saints raise their eyes and lift up their hands with horror when they talk of negro slavery in the land of Washington. But they forget, — no, they do not forget, — they wilfully shut their eyes to the truth that the enslaved blacks in the United States are an enviable race when compared with our English myriads of famishing sons and daughters of toil and our starving paupers. Talk of tyranny and oppression! Why, where is greater tyranny practised than in England toward the poor? O ye vile hypocrites who assemble at Exeter Hall, dare not to say a word against the fine people of the Transatlantic Union, when so much cruelty is practised in this country! There breathes not a nobler, more generous, more enlightened, more free, nor more estimable nation on the face of God's earth than the Americans. Slavery is a black spot upon their civilization, it is true, but that spot is absolutely white when compared with the stain of hellish dye which the miseries of our own poor stamp upon the name of England.

To resume the thread of our narrative: long was the orgy continued at the Beggar's Staff. Ribald jokes elicited peals of laughter; obscene songs were welcomed with vociferous applause. An occasional quarrel and consequent fight varied the interest of the proceedings; and at last two or three of the younger women present stripped themselves stark naked and danced madly under the influence of brandy. Their lascivious movements, disgusting attitudes, and abominable freaks raised the delight of the spectators to a positive delirium; and the liquor flowed so plenteously that the Big Beggarman was perfectly correct in his calculation that every penny of the sum so liberally bestowed by the Amazon would find its way ere morning into his till.

At length, between four and five o'clock, some of the vagabonds and prostitutes began to stagger away to their own dens; others, who were utterly incapable of taking care of themselves, were borne off by their less inebriate friends, and gradually a clearance took place. For a short time the singing and shouting were transferred to the adjacent streets; and the neighbours, who were startled from their slumbers by the untimely din, thus received unmistakable warning that the company at the Beggar's Staff was breaking up.

Thus, while at the West End of London titled dowagers were sleeping comfortably with their fat butlers, widowed ladies of rank with their handsome footmen, honourable misses with the noble father's pretty pages, and fashionable demireps with elegant guardsmen, — while, in fact, the luxurious immorality and voluptuous profligacy of the upper classes enjoyed all the delights of secure and well-concealed sin, the loathed and despised wretches of the vile districts of the metropolis were quitting their orgies and returning to their squalor, their rags, and their wretchedness in those dens which they called their homes.

The slipshod waiter had closed the door of the Beggar's Staff, extinguished the lights in the public room, and retired to his bed which he made up in the kitchen; but the Big Beggarman remained smoking and drinking in the little parlour behind the bar, in case his daughter should return before the place was opened to the morning customers.

On ordinary occasions this man could drink an incredible quantity of potent liquor without experiencing its intoxicating effects; but, in the present instance, he was far advanced toward a stage of complete ebriety. Not only had he considerably exceeded his usual quantum, large as this allowance invariably was, but the exciting occurrences of the evening and the night, not forgetting the severe blow on the head which he received from Lady Letitia, had assisted the brandy in exercising a strong influence over him.

But still he continued to drink and smoke, until his countenance glowed like a furnace, the flesh around his eyes became so swollen that the twinkling orbs seemed buried in valleys of a purply livid flesh, and every vein in his forehead was swollen almost to bursting.

It was about six o'clock on that cold, misty, winter's morning, when an imperious knock at the street door of the establishment aroused the Big Beggarman from his solitary orgy; and staggering cumbrously out of the parlour, he proceeded to answer the summons. As he had suspected, it was Carrotty Poll who thus sought admission; and, on entering the place, she proceeded without uttering a word into the bar, where she helped herself to a large dram of brandy. Then, sinking almost exhausted upon a chair in the parlour, while her father resumed his own seat, she threw back her hood and revealed a countenance a trifle more menacing in its vixenish ferocity than that of a tiger-cat.

"Well, Poll, what is the matter?" demanded the Beggarman, speaking with the hiccough and the thickness of ebriety. "You seem out of sorts a bit. But tell us what you've done?"

"Nothing, nothing at all!" replied the young woman, who appeared as if she would have given worlds to have had some one to vent her diabolical ill-humour upon. "The thing has been a dead failure, and what's more, the Magsman knows all about it."

"Then you must have been and told him, you slut!" exclaimed the ruffian, savagely.

"You're a liar, father," shrieked Carrotty Poll, in the most thrilling intonation of her vixenish voice. "But it's no wonder that you begin to abuse me, for you're as drunk as a beast."

"Well — p'raps I am," said the Beggarman, chuckling, for he was in that state when the very accusation of being intoxicated appeared a capital joke. "But, come, we won't quarrel, Poll," he added, more seriously. "Tell us all that has happened. First, however, let me know whether the Magsman is much put out concerning this affair."

"He didn't seem to care very much about it; but he insisted that you would let Meagles and Lady Letitia go away in safety the moment I came back to give you this message," observed Carrotty Poll; "for they are good people, and he knows very well that they won't trouble themselves about you or your concerns."

"By goles! they've gone of their own accord," said the Beggarman.

"Gone! — what — escaped?" ejaculated his daughter, with unfeigned astonishment.

"Yes, mizzled — bolted," rejoined the villain; and he proceeded to relate the manner in which the prisoners had emancipated themselves, not forgetting to mention the chastisement inflicted upon him by the Amazon.

"Ah! she's a woman of spirit, a splendid creature!" exclaimed Carrotty Poll, who was in such a bad humour with her father that she was rejoiced to hear of his misadventure.

"But do tell us all that has taken place in your affair," again urged the Beggarman. "How the devil came it to prove a failure? And how was it that the Magsman heard anything about it? "

" I'll explain the whole business in a very few words," said the young woman; " and then I shall be off to bed — for I'm tired, and ill, and disgusted."

" And why the deuce are you disgusted? " demanded her father, brutally.

" Because you've managed the whole affair badly," replied Poll. " But I'll tell you what has happened. The Kinchin-Grand ferried me over to Execution Dock; and I told him to make his boat fast and go somewhere in the neighbourhood to amuse himself, but to mind and go down to the wherry every hour to see if I was there waiting for him. Well, I went on to the Mariners' Arms and played the tragedy heroine to perfection," continued the young woman, getting into a better humour at the remembrance of her skill in enacting the part to which she alluded. " I inquired amidst a torrent of tears for my ' beloved husband,' — taking very good care, however, to ascertain that he still continued speechless, before I went up into his room. And when I got there, I found to my annoyance that the officious landlady had provided a nurse to attend upon him. I threw myself upon him, and kissed him, I can assure you, with a very great deal of sincerity; for he is really an uncommon handsome young man, and I don't wonder at Lady Stamford's taste. He was quite conscious, but unable to move or speak. However, I saw that he was amazed by my caresses, especially as, thanks to my disguise, he could not form the least notion who I was. At last he closed his eyes, as if to collect his ideas and ponder who I could be; and I seized that opportunity to tell the old nurse that he was touched in the brain and had not recognized me. But it struck me that the woman eyed me with suspicion; she seemed to have an idea that something was wrong, although she couldn't perhaps tell what. Ramsey fell asleep, and we sat watching by his side. Several times I suggested that certain things should be done, in the hope of getting the old wretch to leave the room, if only for a moment; but she always found some excuse for sticking at her post. I could have strangled the crone outright," added Poll, bitterly; " but I was compelled to be civil to her, and this put me into a still worse humour."

"Devilish provoking!" exclaimed the Beggarman. "But go on."

"Well, several hours passed in this annoying way," continued Poll; "and at last Ramsey awoke again. He muttered a few inarticulate words, and then began to gaze steadfastly upon me. I was forced to caress him, but he repulsed me with aversion; for he had by this time recovered sufficient power to enable him to use his hands feebly. I whispered to the old nurse that his brain was still wandering, and she smiled faintly — I thought, incredulously. Some medicine had been sent by the doctor, and I was resolved to make an effort to accomplish the purpose in view. I accordingly approached the mantel, turning my back toward the nurse in such a way that she could not see what I was doing, and hastily mixed some of the poison with the draught. Then, advancing toward the bed, I told the nurse to raise the patient in her arms, while I administered the dose. She obeyed me instantly, and I began to think that my idea of being suspected by her was unfounded. But never, never shall I forget the change that came rapidly over Ramsey's countenance, as he sat up, supported by the old woman. He first gazed on me for a few instants with the most steadfast earnestness; then his features expressed a horror which in less than a minute completely convulsed them, and all in a moment, like a flash of lightning, he recognized me!"

"What — did he say so?" demanded the young woman's father.

"No, but I saw it in his manner, in his countenance," responded Carrotty Poll. "It was as easy to read what was passing in his mind as if it was a printed book. And then his conduct showed that he knew who I was, in spite of my disguise; for the instant I put the glass to his lips, he recovered power enough to dash it out of my hand, and exclaim, 'No! no!' The nurse let him fall back upon his pillow; and he covered his face with his hands, moaning in a piteous manner. 'His brain wanders still,' I said to the old woman, as I threw the medicine into the fireplace. 'Why did you chuck it away?' she demanded, fixing on me a look that seemed to pierce me through and through; 'I could have made him take it.' Now, you know that I am not wanting in presence of mind; but I admit that I grew so confused I was at a loss what to do, and, inventing some excuse, — I really forget what, — I left the room, not once looking back, for I felt convinced that the old hag was staring after me with her nasty gray eyes."

" I dare say it was all fancy on your part, Poll," said the Beggarman. " The crone's ways were peculiar, p'raps — "

" Well, it might be so," interrupted the young woman; " but I didn't stop to make those reflections at the time. To tell you the truth, I was glad to get away; for I began to think that the nurse would alarm the house, and the landlord might keep me till he could send for a constable. Well, I left the room, as I told you. This was about an hour ago, and as the Mariners' Arms is an early breakfast-house for labourers and colliers employed at the docks and wharfs, the potman was taking down the shutters. There was a light in the bar; and just as I was going out, who should come in to get a morning dram, but Joe Warren."

" He was up betimes, at all events," observed the Big Beggarman. " Of course he recognized you! "

" To be sure, in a moment," answered Poll; " because he has often seen me decked out in this way. Before I could give him a look to prevent him from speaking to me, he asked what the deuce was going on, and insisted on my taking a drop of brandy with him. Then the talkative potman began to inquire of me how the gentleman up-stairs was; and the fellow gabbled away at such a rate that Joe Warren heard quite enough to make it impossible for me to tell him any lies about it. He followed me out; and I thought the best plan was to explain the whole matter to him, just for all the world as if neither you nor me ever meant to keep it a secret. He said he didn't care much about Ramsey's affair, and told me to mind and tell you to put away his share of the five hundred guineas; as everything relating to the Aylesbury bankers was a matter in which he had his claim for ' regulars.' I assured him that you had already done so; and the business was thus made square enough. He then ordered me to have Meagles and Lady Lade set at liberty the instant that I returned; and he said that you needn't trouble yourself about Ramsey, as he'll attend to him. He also observed that he intended to make a call this evening in Pall Mall — you know where — and it is very likely you won't see him again till to-morrow night. We then parted, and I found the Kinchin-Grand waiting for me at Execution Dock."

"Well, and why the devil should you pretend to be disgusted with the whole affair?" demanded the Big Beggarman. "In my opinion, it's gone off uncommon well, — especially since our friend Joe isn't put out about it, and will undertake to keep Ramsey quiet."

"I am disgusted," said Carrotty Poll, with vixenish acerbity, "because you have made a mull of the thing. You never ought to have played your tricks on Meagles and Lady Lade. One is a devilish good fellow, and the other is a nice woman; and they might have been good friends to us."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?" growled the Beggarman.

"Because when you had locked 'em up, it was too late. However," she added, in a milder tone, — for she saw that her father was in no humour to be upbraided, — "what's done can't be helped; but I am preciously annoyed at having lost so many hours in such a stupid affair as this expedition to the Mariners' Arms, tired as I was already, and then that cursed old nurse annoyed me more than enough."

"Well, go and sleep off your ill-humour, Poll," said her father. "I sha'n't be sorry to get to bed myself."

The parent and daughter then retired to their chambers, and during the next three hours a profound silence reigned throughout the Beggar's Staff, until the slipshod waiter rose at about nine to open the premises again, for, as it was a Sunday morning, he had snoozed a little later than usual.

CHAPTER XXXVI

MRS. BRACE AND HER VISITORS

It was the Sabbath evening, and Mrs. Brace was seated alone in her exquisitely furnished parlour. Some of her young ladies had gone to pass the day with their parents or friends; others had obtained permission to " go to church," — which meant that they had certain little amatory appointments to keep; and a few remained in their own apartment, chatting together or reading novels.

Mrs. Brace had, as a matter of course, attended divine service in the morning at St. James's Church; and no one present on the occasion had appeared to pay a more marked attention than this lady to the eloquent discourse of the Reverend Doctor Twaddler. On leaving the sacred edifice, when the ceremony was concluded, she had observed to two or three female friends whom she encountered in the porch, " What a beautiful sermon! " and, having thus sustained her reputation of being a woman having a due sense of religion in her soul, she returned home, laughing in her sleeve at the facility with which a character for piety is obtained in this land of cant, humbug, and hypocrisy.

And now, at about six o'clock in the evening of this same Sunday, we find the handsome milliner seated by the cheerful fire in her elegant little parlour, and amusing herself with a number of the *Town and Country Magazine,* a publication which chronicled the fashions and scandal of the times, and which, being written in a style that would bring a blush to the cheek, even in a brothel, enjoyed a large circulation amongst the aristocratic classes.

For the prurient imaginations of ladies in high life have ever revelled in scenes of licentiousness, whether described in books or delineated in pictures. For this reason Shakespeare's works are so greedily devoured by them, and what well-born miss of sixteen has not perused Byron's "Don Juan"? Let aristocratic papas and mammas examine the shelves in the library; and they will find that the books most frequently in request among the young ladies, are "Tom Jones," "Joseph Andrews," and "Peregrine Pickle." Again, look in the fashionable print-shops, and contemplate the engravings which, from their price, can find purchasers only in wealthy circles, and you will not fail to observe that they are nearly all invested with an air of voluptuousness. Half-naked bosoms lend their charms to these pictures; and the same may be said of the plates which embellish Annuals, Keepsakes, and Books of Beauty. Is not this true, reader? But if another proof be requisite to support our argument, it is found in the plays produced at the theatres frequented by the fashion and the aristocracy; for those pieces which abound in the most indecent allusions or scenes which furnish food for an impure fancy to elaborate, are invariably the most successful. And that ladies in high life only affect morality, and really care nothing about it in their hearts, is undoubtedly demonstrated by the circumstance that, whereas they shrink in loathing and horror from contact with the daughter of crime who may chance to cross their path as they step from their carriage into the lobby of the theatre, they enter that theatre with the foreknowledge that they are about to behold the acting or listen to the warbling of women whose profligacy and dissoluteness are notorious throughout the civilized world. Let us not, then, be again told of the immorality of the millions; let not the titled, the high-born, and the wealthy set themselves up as examples; for when they thus insolently arrogate to themselves the right of being taken as models, they become breathing, living, walking lies.

It was six o'clock, we said, and Mrs. Brace was seated in her own private parlour.

She was dressed in a style of the most becoming elegance; and, though in her fortieth year, never perhaps had she appeared so truly handsome. Her hair, as Florimel had observed on a former occasion, was radiant in its glossy blackness; a soft tint of artificial red blended so finely and delicately with the natural white on her plump cheeks that the presence of the roseate cosmetic would not have been suspected by even the most experienced observer; her well-shaped nose, with a scarcely perceptible rising in the middle, imparted a graceful air to her countenance; her mouth, pouting but not gross, was soft even to the eye, and, when smiling, revealed a set of teeth dazzling and perfect; and the whiteness of her neck continued with an increasing delicacy and transparency to the full bosom, which was only half-concealed by the low corsage of her dress.

There was altogether about this charming woman such a halo of voluptuousness, tempered by an exquisite refinement of manner, such a melting sensuousness, relieved by a winning grace, such an admirable blending of physical charms with moral fascinations, that even a youth of sixteen might have forgotten her forty years, and have fallen at her feet, languishing for her smiles.

The timepiece on the mantel had proclaimed, with its tinkling silver bell, the hour of six, when Harriet, the confidential lady's-maid, threw open the door and announced "Mr. Harley."

Mrs. Brace instantly rose from her seat, and advanced to welcome her visitor with profound respect, and yet with a smile which divested her manner of anything bordering on servility or cringing sycophancy.

"I received the note which your Royal Highness — " began the lady.

"Hush! am not I always Mr. Harley — plain Mr. Harley — within these walls?" interrupted the prince, as he pressed Mrs. Brace's hand in his own. "Whenever you are indiscreet enough to address me otherwise than by my pseudonym, I shall punish you thus," and passing his arm around her waist, he drew her toward him and imprinted a long kiss upon her pouting lips.

"I am fearful, Mr. Harley," she observed, with a fascinating smile, "that if you punish me in this manner I shall prove guilty of the oversight very often."

"Is it possible, Fanny, that you can care one fig for me after the lapse of so many years?" said the prince, conducting her to her chair and seating himself on another near her.

"To have loved you once, Mr. Harley, is to love you for ever," answered Mrs. Brace.

" And yet you not only know that I am constantly up to my neck in intrigues," rejoined his Royal Highness, " but you kindly lend me your invaluable aid."

" Certainly! it is my delight to make you happy," returned the lady.

" You reason like a sensible woman," said the prince. " Besides, you yourself indulge in little love-passages occasionally. Come, confess the truth to me, Fanny. You and I are such old friends, you know — friends of fifteen or sixteen years' standing — that we need not be ashamed to give each other our confidence."

" My dear Mr. Harley, you know that I am not a saint," observed Mrs. Brace, in a subdued tone and casting down her eyes.

" I should indeed wonder if you were," exclaimed the prince; " for you are really as handsome now as you struck me to be the first time I ever saw you. Somewhat stouter — but then I adore embonpoint in women," he added, his eyes gloating upon the milliner's well-developed charms.

" And if I were thin, you would found a compliment upon sylphlike elegance and delicate symmetry," said Mrs. Brace, smiling archly. " Ah! Mr. Harley, the English people may well boast of you as being the most polished gentleman in Europe."

" No — does any one say that of me? " demanded the prince, his countenance lighting up with a satisfaction and a triumph which he could not conceal.

" Most assuredly," responded Mrs. Brace. " The newspapers, the magazines, the poets, the novelists, all agree on that point."

" But don't you know, Fanny, that the public press of England is the most grovelling, debased, and despicable lickspittle toward royalty — "

" Oh, this vituperation from your lips! " ejaculated the milliner, affecting to be shocked. " The press only does its duty and tells the truth when it speaks highly in favour of the heir apparent to the throne."

" I think that last phrase of yours comes within the range of offences which I threatened to punish in a certain manner," exclaimed the prince; and once more he pressed his lips to those of the handsome milliner, who, to use the words of Sir Giles Overreach in the play, "kissed close again."

"Every caress that you thus bestow is an act of treason to the lovely girl whom you are to meet presently," said Mrs. Brace, after a short pause, during which she readjusted the lace that fringed the bosom of her gown, the prince having somewhat disturbed it with his intrusive hand.

"Nay, these innocent toyings only render me more anxious to embrace the charming Octavia," returned his Royal Highness. "According to the note which I received from her, she will be here punctually at seven; but I sent you word that I should call at six, because you have been so good and kind to me lately that I thought you deserved this little attention on my part. In fact, I came early on purpose to have an hour's chat with you, as I knew that you would not be busy on a Sunday evening."

"It is really very condescending on your part," observed Mrs. Brace, with another of her sweetest smiles. "But how do you manage to correspond with the young lady, since the letters do not pass through my hands?"

"They receive letters for me, addressed to Mr. Harley, at Long's Hotel," answered the prince. "Octavia, believing me to be a country gentleman having a seat in some part of Kent, would have been surprised if I had not told her where I was staying — or rather, pretended to be staying — in London; and therefore I made her believe that I was residing at the fashionable hotel in Bond Street."

"I understand," said Mrs. Brace. "You have not seen her since you passed the night together in my house?"

"No; but you told me all that had occurred, — how her father had returned, and how Lord Florimel had escorted her home. She herself likewise mentioned those circumstances in her letter to me yesterday. It appears that Mr. Clarendon's position has undergone a sudden and remarkable change, that his income is considerably increased, and that he is about to remove with his daughters to a handsome home in Cavendish Square. It will be all the more easy for Octavia to get away from home at times; because young ladies who have the means to go out shopping, and who have friends to visit, can always invent a thousand excuses for a frequent absence of several hours. Besides, you have assured me that her sister Pauline is already engaged in a love-intrigue on her part — "

" No, not exactly an intrigue," exclaimed Mrs. Brace; " because she triumphed over the temptation of the moment, and reduced her admirer Florimel to as sickly a state of sentimentality as ever I had the misfortune to contemplate."

" And is he not recovered from that condition? " demanded the prince.

" Far from it. I saw him yesterday, and he was devising a thousand schemes to obtain a formal introduction to the Clarendon family, so that he may visit them on a proper footing and in due time propose for the younger daughter."

" This must not be, Fanny," said his Royal Highness. " Should Lord Florimel become the husband of Pauline, a sense of honour will induce him to rescue Octavia from this intrigue, — and such a proceeding will by no means suit me. I am really desperately enamoured of this girl, and cannot part from her yet awhile. Is Florimel incurable with his sentimentality? "

" It would be at least a very difficult matter to effect such a cure," answered the milliner. " He has taken a solemn vow to abjure what he now calls his profligate life; he has sworn to forbear from all intrigue; in fine, he has resolved to become worthy of possessing the innocent, amiable, and virtuous Pauline. Those are his very words."

" This is nauseating in the extreme," observed the prince, in a tone of unfeigned disgust; for the royal voluptuary could not understand the existence of such a pure and holy feeling as that which Pauline had awakened in the breast of Lord Florimel. " I am not acquainted with the young nobleman, or I might perhaps undertake the task of making him sensible of his folly in yielding to such maudlin emotions. But you, my dear Fanny — Now, tell me candidly," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, " has anything beyond mere friendship ever yet existed between you and Lord Florimel? "

" Nothing — on my honour! " answered Mrs. Brace, emphatically.

" Then it is for you to take the young nobleman in hand, and subdue him," rejoined the prince. " Do you comprehend me? Yes, by the blush that rises to your cheeks, I perceive that you not only understand me, but that the suggestion affords you pleasure. Promise me to do your best in this matter, as it is of the highest importance to me, in my amour with Octavia, that she should not obtain a defender, a monitor, and perhaps an avenger, in the person of a brother-in-law."

"I will do all that you have recommended," said Mrs. Brace.

The prince was about to bestow upon her another tender caress as a reward for her ready complaisance, when the door opened and Harriet entered — or rather, burst into the room — with an affrighted countenance.

"What means this intrusion?" demanded his Royal Highness, haughtily.

"Oh, madam!" exclaimed the lady's-maid, addressing herself in an appealing manner to her mistress, as if beseeching her to propitiate the wrath of the prince, — for she of course knew who the feigned Mr. Harley was, —"Oh, madam! pray pardon me, but such an ill-looking man has just called — and at the Pall Mall entrance, too — "

"An ill-looking man," repeated Mrs. Brace, becoming deadly pale even through the roseate tinge which art had so delicately shed upon her cheeks, so that this woman, handsome to a degree of splendour, grew ghastly to behold.

"Yes, madam," was the servant's rapid and excited answer. "And he says he must and will see you, as he has something particular to tell you about that robbery the other night — But, gracious goodness! he is coming this way — I hear his heavy footsteps approaching!"

"This is awkward — most awkward!" exclaimed the milliner, collecting all her courage to meet the emergency. "Your Royal Highness — "

"Perdition! I may be known — recognized!" ejaculated the prince, who had started from his seat at the sound of the advancing steps. "Here! this will be best!" he added; and in another moment he was concealed behind the ample window-curtain which reached from the ceiling to the floor.

Mrs. Brace would have given worlds that the prince should not have taken this step; but it was too late — the mischief was accomplished in the twinkling of an eye, and scarcely had the waving of the curtain subsided when the Magsman appeared upon the threshold of the apartment. Harriet glided past the intruder with terrified looks, and closed the door behind him; while Mrs. Brace sank back in her chair, a perfect pandemonium raging in her bosom.

Well, indeed, might the lady's-maid have described this formidable visitor as "an ill-looking man;" for, although it was Sunday, he had not bestowed the slightest pains upon his toilet. His garments were coarse, shabby, and negligent as usual; his coal-black hair was as rough and his whiskers were as bushy and fierce as ever; and his eyes gleamed with a sinister expression that was habitual to them, from beneath the coarse, shaggy, overhanging brows. He kept his hat upon his head as he entered the room; and he carried in his hand a huge stick, or rather club, by means of which his powerful arm might have felled an ox at one blow.

For a few moments Mrs. Brace was overwhelmed by his presence. But suddenly a thought struck her; and, starting from her seat, she said, in a low and hurried tone, "Follow me into another room — I expect company here every minute."

"Well, then, the company may wait till you and me have done the little business that has brought me here this evening," replied the Magsman. "The place looks so comfortable," he added, taking a calm and deliberate survey of the beautifully furnished parlour, "that I prefer staying here. Besides, there's a capital fire, and the weather's deuced cold, I can tell you."

Thus speaking, the Magsman took the chair which the prince had quitted only a few minutes previously; and Mrs. Brace resumed her seat, pushing it back, however, to a greater distance from the formidable ruffian who had placed himself so near her.

"What! do you think I carry a pestilence about with me?" exclaimed the Magsman, offended at this movement. "But no matter; we won't quarrel about trifles. I dare say I'm not quite so good-looking as when — "

"For heaven's sake! tell me what you require — what you want," interrupted Mrs. Brace, in a tone of feverish excitement.

"Money," responded the villain, with coarse abruptness.

"I sent you five hundred guineas the other day, according to agreement," exclaimed the wretched woman; "and it was an understanding between us that you would trouble me no more."

"Never mind the understanding," said the Magsman. "Half of the blunt went to my pal, the Big Beggarman, who was with me here t'other night, and as I've an unfortunate itch for gambling, I've lost all my share. So I thought I would just drop in this evening, to inquire after your dear health and request a further supply."

"How much do you require?" gasped Mrs. Brace, in a faint tone, while all the anguish which this interview excited in her soul was betrayed in the workings of her countenance, hard though she struggled to conceal her emotions.

"Another five hundred will answer the purpose — at least for the present," returned the Magsman, with the tone and air of one who felt that he had the power, if not the right, to command.

"For the present!" repeated Mrs. Brace, almost starting from her seat. "Then am I to expect periodical visits from you?" she demanded, in a voice which she vainly endeavoured to render firm and even defiant.

"Well, we shall see about all that, my dear," said the Magsman. "You wouldn't surely be so cruel as to refuse your own — "

"Silence!" almost shrieked the wretched woman. "The money shall be sent to you to-morrow," she added, her tone suddenly changing and sinking to a hoarse whisper. "Now will you have the kindness to leave me?"

"What! you don't so much as ask me to wash my mouth out with a drop of something short!" exclaimed the ruffian. "But I see how it is. You look upon me as a low fellow, a vulgarian, the scum of the earth, while you're a fine lady, pranked out in silks and satins, living in a beautiful house, enjoying every comfort — "

"In the name of God, let us terminate this interview at once," interrupted the milliner, fixing a look of earnest appeal upon her terrible companion. "You can come to-morrow night yourself to fetch the money, if you choose, and then we will have some conversation together. But this evening — "

"You expect company — eh?" said the Magsman. "Well, I don't think I'm exactly in full costume," he added, surveying his ruffian-like attire with a deliberate coolness which left room to believe that he had still some doubts upon the subject. " But really you're not treating me well, my dear; for after so long a separation — it must be a matter of fifteen or sixteen years — "

" Oh, pray — pray leave me now — I beseech — I implore you! " exclaimed the milliner, her voice absolutely expressing a rending agony; and she joined her white hands appealingly as she thus spoke.

" By jingo! this amounts to a positive insult! " growled the Magsman, not offering to budge from his chair. " You ought to be precious glad to see me again; but instead of that, you want to get rid of me for the sake of some trumpery folks who're coming to swill tea and coffee and devour muffins. Well, I sha'n't force my company upon you much longer, as I see it's disagreeable. So, if you'll give me a drop of brandy, or anything short that you can lay your hand on at the moment, I'll take myself off."

The reader can imagine the horrified feelings which had raged within the bosom of the elegant milliner from the first moment of the ruffian's entrance, — the bare thought that all his detestable vulgarity and loathsome familiarity were exhibited in the hearing of the most polished gentleman in Europe being quite sufficient to overwhelm and crush her. But, in addition to this, she entertained the appalling dread that he would give utterance to something which might reveal to the ears of the prince a secret she would sooner die than have betrayed.

It was therefore with an indescribable sensation of relief that she heard him intimate his readiness to depart; and, springing from her chair with the lightness of a hoyden nymph, she took from a cupboard a silver liqueur-stand, containing crystal decanters filled with spirits and cordials and surrounded by beautifully cut glasses.

" You haven't got a tumbler handy, have you? " inquired the Magsman, likewise rising from his seat, " for I'm not accustomed to drink thimblefuls at a time."

The milliner produced a large hock-glass, which the fellow filled to the brim with brandy; and, raising it to his lips, he said, with a leering look at the lady, " Your health, or rayther, my love to you, Fanny, and may you be in a better humour when I favour you with a call next time."

Mrs. Brace reseated herself, for a faintness came over her as the man called her by her Christian name; but she shook off the oppressive sensation by the time he had finished his fiery draught, which he poured slowly and without intermission down his throat.

"Well, that's better than the bingo at the Beggar's Staff," he observed, as he placed the glass upon the table; then, surveying the milliner in silence for a few moments, he added, "By goles! you're handsomer than you was sixteen years ago. You've filled out wonderfully, and seem as plump as a partridge. I'll just have one kiss in remembrance of old times, and then I'll be off."

"No, no!" shrieked Mrs. Brace, whose anguish had become intolerably excruciating while the ruffian was thus complimenting her. "Leave me, for God's sake! leave me — you promised you would — "

"One kiss, I say!" exclaimed the Magsman, advancing toward her with extended arms, his club being for the moment laid on the table.

"I will die sooner!" was the lady's emphatic answer; and, losing all prudential control over herself, she darted an agonizing glance toward the curtain.

"By the living jingo! I begin to suspect something now," cried the Magsman, who had not failed to notice that rapid but affrighted look. "A lover, I'll be bound!"

And he strode toward the window.

"Stop! — you dare not do it! — you know not what you are doing!" screamed Mrs. Brace, darting forward and rapid grasping him by the arm.

"Lord bless ye! I ain't jealous — but I must have a look at him, for curiosity's sake," said the Magsman, pushing her back into her seat; and, at the same moment that a stifled shriek came from the lips of the wretched woman, the curtain was drawn violently aside by the ruffian's remorseless hand.

The Prince of Wales, whose countenance was glowing with indignation, thus became revealed to the Magsman; and the fellow was struck dumb and motionless with mingled awe and astonishment, for he instantly recognized the heir apparent to the throne.

His Royal Highness perceived in a moment that the ruffian knew who he was; and, stepping forward, he pointed

"THE FELLOW WAS STRUCK DUMB"

Original etching by Marcel.

imperiously toward the door, exclaiming, in a stern voice, " Begone, sir, or it will be the worse for you! "

" No, I'm damned if I'm to be bullied in this way," retorted the Magsman, instantly recovering his self-possession and cool insolence. " The world says your Royal Highness is no better than you should be, and now I've had a proof of it."

For a few moments the prince was staggered by this unexpected display of defiance; but speedily becoming alive again to the embarrassing nature of his present position, he said, " The coarseness of your allusion is only equalled by its falsity. This lady I respect, and you shall not insult her in my presence. Now, depart quietly, or you will be handed over to the keeping of a constable for endeavouring to extort money from her."

" That's a capital joke," exclaimed the Magsman, with a chuckling laugh. " Why, everything she's got, by right belongs to me — "

" Silence! " screamed Mrs. Brace, almost frantic.

" And what's more," added the ruffian, heedless of this interruption, " I'll bring an action against your Royal Highness for crim. con. with my wife! "

The milliner shrieked, and fell senseless upon the carpet.

" Miscreant! " ejaculated the prince, unable to restrain his rage at the last threat levelled against himself, " I'll have you hanged before you're many weeks older."

" No, you won't," responded the man, with a tone and air of insolent defiance; " but you'll send me five hundred guineas to-morrow along with the same sum that my wife has promised me, and on that condition I shall say no more of this business."

Having thus dictated his terms to the heir apparent, the Magsman grasped his club and strode out of the room, banging the door violently behind him.

The noise aroused Mrs. Brace from her swoon, and his Royal Highness raised her in his arms; then, placing her on a chair, he filled a tumbler with water and made her swallow some of the refreshing beverage.

Not that the prince cared very much for her. His pride had been terribly wounded by the idea that he had ever intrigued with the wife of such a ruffian as the one who had just quitted the apartment; but the milliner was too useful to him in many ways and was acquainted with too many of his secrets to permit him to treat her with coolness or indifference, much less with disgust.

" Oh, is not all this a horrible dream? " murmured the wretched woman, as she slowly came to herself; but as the full tide of memory swept back in her excited brain, she raised her eyes in an imploring manner toward the prince, saying, " What must your Royal Highness think of me now? "

" Just the same as I did before," was the prompt but insincere answer. " You cannot help the degradation into which that vile man is evidently plunged, and I pay a better compliment to your taste than to suppose that when you married him years ago he was anything like what he is at present."

" Oh, I thank you — sincerely thank you for these assurances," said Mrs. Brace, considerably relieved; and she pressed his hand to her heaving bosom.

" To-morrow you must send him a thousand guineas — mind, a thousand guineas, Fanny," observed the heir apparent; " that is to say, five hundred for yourself, and five hundred for me. He will then leave you tranquil, no doubt. If not, we must devise some energetic measure to send him out of the country altogether."

" Did he, then, dare to make stipulations with you? " inquired Mrs. Brace, who, it will be remembered, was in a senseless state when the Magsman ordered the prince to send him the money that was to purchase his secrecy and forbearance.

" He did. But we will not dwell upon the subject," hastily observed his Royal Highness, who experienced the keenest sense of mortification at the insult which he had found himself compelled to put up with. " I will send you over a cheque for five hundred guineas in the morning, and you must not fail to remit the thousand to that man before night."

The milliner was about to make some remark, when Harriet entered the room to announce that Miss Clarendon had just arrived, and was waiting for Mr. Harley in the apartment to which the lady's maid had conducted her.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ANOTHER MEETING

It was not without an emotion of annoyance that Octavia Clarendon had found herself escorted by Harriet to the same room where she had met her lover on the two previous occasions, and from which the bedchamber opened; for it shocked and pained her to think that the lady of the house and her servant must fancy that she came thither only as the mistress of Mr. Harley, and not in the quality of his destined wife. She dared not, however, make an observation upon the subject to Harriet, for shame sealed her lips; but when the domestic had withdrawn, tears started to the long black lashes which shaded the lovely creature's deep blue eyes.

For a few moments she remained pensive and melancholy, more than half-repenting of having of her own accord made this appointment. But when she recollected how ardently she had longed to meet her lover again, and that this desire was now on the point of being gratified, a smile played upon her red lips like a sunbeam kissing a rosebud, and she hastily wiped away the traces of her tears.

Scarcely had she thus composed herself, when the door opened, and the next instant she was clasped in the arms of her lover.

" Oh, my sweet Octavia," exclaimed the prince, pressing her again and again to his bosom, " how truly Elysian is the happiness which you have thus afforded me! Never, since we parted the last time, has your worshipped image been absent from my mind; but now the radiance of your loveliness renews the flood of intense delight which the remembrance of all that glorious beauty has poured into my soul."

"Dearest George, I also have thought of thee without ceasing," murmured Octavia, all her senses appearing to dissolve into softness beneath the melting influence of the insidious language which the melodious yet manly voice of her lover breathed in her ear.

"Yes, my angel," continued the practised and systematic deceiver, having conducted her to a seat, and placing himself by her side, "I have not for a single moment proved unfaithful to thy sweet image. It has been my contemplation by day, and has rendered my dreams delicious at night. But when thou art not with me, it seems as if a strain of exquisite music had passed away, leaving only the faint prolongation of the dulcet sounds in the ears."

"These assurances create an ineffable joy within my heart," said the enraptured young lady, suffering the prince, without a remonstrance, to remove her bonnet and ample shawl, while the very soul of her impassioned love breathed upon him through the words which she uttered, and shone upon him in her heavenly looks and her sunny smiles.

"You cannot conceive the delight which your letter gave me," continued his Royal Highness, whose princely rank was so little suspected by the confiding Octavia. "It is said that poetry wafts the soul of the bard into an Elysian realm of his own creating, where thoughts and images appear as in a celestial temple full of music and incense, and whence his beatific spirit bears them back to the earth to weave them in immortal verse. But, oh, how much more truly may all this be said of love, which wafts the soul to no ideal world, but into a heaven having a real and palpable existence, and from which there is no awaking to find it all a dream!"

"And shall you ever entertain these thoughts which infuse so much delight into my heart?" murmured Octavia, who could not possibly have understood, even if a saint had risen from the dead to proclaim the fact, that her lover experienced not a particle of the poetic sentiment which he described in such glowing terms, but that his passion was a mere gross sensuousness.

"I shall never cease to adore and worship you, my angel," he replied, straining her to his breast, and lavishing upon her the warmest caresses.

" You are aware that my father has returned, and you will now seek an early opportunity to form his acquaintance? " said Octavia, thus delicately reminding the prince of all the pledges and vows which he had made her on previous occasions.

" When he shall have become settled in his new abode, dearest," was the specious answer, " I shall obtain an introduction to him. He now stands every chance of shortly becoming heir to the Marchmont peerage."

" Unless some favourable change should take place in respect to the Honourable Mr. Arthur Eaton, who, as I informed you in my letter, is wasting away visibly. Some frightful and unknown malady has fallen upon him," added Octavia, in a tone of deep commiseration.

" And is no cause alleged for this strange indisposition? " inquired the prince, who was toying with his lovely mistress while thus conversing.

" My father was speaking of the matter again this morning," answered Octavia, " and it appears that some time ago the Honourable Mr. Eaton was supposed to be deeply enamoured of the orphan niece of a rich nobleman; but he suddenly discontinued his visits to her, without any obvious reason. Her noble uncle brought her with him from Derbyshire to London, and since that time the mysterious sickness has stricken the young man. Nevertheless, my father declares that it is not a mental malady, but a physical one; he is not pining away through disappointed hope and blighted affection, but is gradually perishing, as if all the elements of existence were sapped and undermined."

" This is most extraordinary," said the prince, on whose breast Octavia's head lay reclined, while from time to time he imprinted burning kisses upon her brow, her cheeks, and her lips. " But since we are thus discoursing for a moment — and observe, it shall not be for long," he added, tenderly, — " upon various and comparatively indifferent matters, let me ask you something more than you have already yet told me relative to those two ladies whose travelling-chariot broke down in front of your house, the very first evening that I was so fortunate — so truly blessed as to become acquainted with you. On the last two occasions that we met here, I have been going to speak to you about them; but subjects of a nearer and dearer interest so much absorbed my attention that I lost sight of the matter."

"Do you not remember that my sister and I informed you those ladies were a Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. Smith, and that we fancied they were travelling *incognito?*" said Octavia. "But you yourself declared that they did not deceive us in respect to their names; and yet my father shares the suspicion which Pauline and myself originally entertained on that head."

"Ah! then your father is acquainted with the fact of their visit?" observed the prince.

"Oh, yes, how could we keep such a circumstance concealed from him?" observed Octavia. "Besides, when Mrs. Smith enjoined the strictest secrecy, she did not include my father — "

"The strictest secrecy relative to what, Octavia?" demanded the prince, his curiosity suddenly excited by the singularity of the observation which had just fallen from the lips of his charming mistress.

"Heavens! what have I been saying?" cried the young lady, absolutely frightened at her want of caution; but her mind had been lulled, by the melting softness of her heart's feelings, into such a dreamy bliss, that she had spoken inadvertently and without reflection.

"Is it possible that you can have a secret which you will keep from me?" asked the prince, assuming a tone tenderly reproachful. "Remember, dearest, you are already my wife in the sight of Heaven, and, as such, not a thought nor deed should be concealed from my knowledge. It is not thus that I would act toward you, Octavia."

"Oh, do not upbraid me, George — dearest George!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him affectionately, while the tears streamed down her cheeks. "It is not a secret regarding myself, but it may possibly involve the honour of one of those ladies — "

"Such a secret would be safe in my keeping, sweet girl," interrupted the prince, now experiencing a curiosity so intense, and entertaining a suspicion so terrible, that he was sorely troubled inwardly, although he concealed his emotion as much as possible.

"I will tell you all — everything," said the yielding Octavia; "but first assure me of your forgiveness for having hitherto maintained so much unnecessary reserve on that point."

"Forgiveness!" he repeated, smoothing down her rich and shining auburn hair with his hand; "how could I be angry with you, even for an instant?"

"Dear George, how kind you are!" she murmured, the tears on her cheeks exhaling with the warmth of the sunny smiles which now succeeded them.

"Proceed, my love," said the prince, drawing her again toward him, so that her head once more reclined upon his breast; for he did not wish her now to contemplate his features while she spoke, inasmuch as he had a presentiment that he was about to hear something calculated to excite the acutest feelings that could possibly indicate their hidden workings by the expression of the countenance. "You said that this secret might possibly concern the honour of one of those ladies — "

"Yes — if she were not married," interrupted the artless Octavia. "But if Mrs. Mordaunt be the real name, as you said it was, of that beautiful young lady of eighteen, then must she be married, and there is no disgrace. At the same time, the mystery which was observed relative to the child — "

"The child!" repeated the prince, scarcely able to control his feelings. "But you are speaking, my dearest Octavia, as if I were already acquainted with everything, whereas, I know nothing as yet of all this."

"Pardon me for the giddy way in which I began my narrative, dear George," said the lovely girl, pressing his hand to her lips. "I should have told you at once that Mrs. Mordaunt became a mother almost immediately after she entered our house."

"A mother!" murmured the prince, under his breath; for it was with the greatest difficulty he could now subdue the terrible emotions that were agitating in his bosom. "And what became of the child?" he demanded.

"He was placed in the care of a surgeon named Thurston, and who resides in our neighbourhood," answered Octavia.

"Then it was a boy?" exclaimed the prince; and, scarcely pausing for an instant, he added, "I suppose the surgeon attended upon my — Mrs. Mordaunt, I mean, in her confinement?"

"Yes. But am not I wrong in communicating all these facts, dearest George?" exclaimed the lovely girl, for she began to perceive that there was something singular in the manner of her companion; and, raising her head, she gazed upon him with the sweetest expression of her splendid blue eyes. "You tell me that you are acquainted with Mrs. Mordaunt, and you will doubtless meet her in the circles in which you move. Oh, do not bring a blush to her cheeks, if there be really dishonour associated with all I have now revealed to you!"

"You cannot think me so base, my charming Octavia!" said the prince, straining her to his breast. "It is a mere matter of conversation — perhaps of curiosity on my part; but believe me when I assure you that there is no dishonour attached to Mrs. Mordaunt's name, and I can well divine the family reasons which have compelled her to observe so much mystery in respect to the birth of her child. A runaway and secret match against the wishes of her parents, and —"

"Oh, I can understand it now," interrupted Miss Clarendon, placing implicit credence in the specious explanation which the prince thus volunteered. "Poor creature! she is greatly to be pitied if her parents be so cruel! So beautiful, so amiable, so elegant in her manner —"

"But were you ever to behold her, riding, for instance, in her carriage, you would not point her out to any one with whom you might happen to be at the time?" said the prince.

"Assuredly not!" exclaimed the young lady. "Besides, all my thoughts, all my ideas, all my sentiments are so absorbed in the love which I bear for you, that I have no leisure nor inclination to trouble myself relative to the affairs of others. But you appear to be preoccupied, George — you are not well; or else something is troubling you?" she added, gazing upon him with the tenderest solicitude.

"Oh, I am always happy when in your society, my beloved girl," he cried, now lavishing upon her the most ardent caresses. "But tell me, how long can you remain with me this evening? — for it is paradise while you are with me, and a dreary void while you are away."

"I must return home by eleven o'clock, without fail," she answered, hiding her blushing countenance on his breast. " Seek not to detain me longer, dear George; for I could not find an excuse to account to my father for a protracted absence."

" Not for worlds would I involve you in so cruel an embarrassment! " exclaimed the prince, gluing his mouth to her luscious lips, until her countenance glowed with the ardour of passion and her melting blue eyes swam in the delicious languor that expressed soft desires.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE EARL AND COUNTESS OF DESBOROUGH

THE scene now shifts to a noble mansion in Berkeley Square.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the incidents just related; and in a splendidly furnished apartment, in the lordly dwelling alluded to, a lady was seated, or, rather, reclining in a negligent manner upon a sofa drawn near the fire.

She was about twenty-eight years of age, and very handsome. Her complexion was a clear olive; but, beneath that transparent skin of delicately tinged bistre, glowed a fine carnation, the whole effect being that of softness combined with thriving health.

Her eyes were black, large and brilliant; and, in the proud lustre of their rays, those magnificent orbs denoted the strength of the lady's intellectual powers and the energy of her character, at the same time that they bore testimony to the ardour of her temperament and the warmth of her passions.

Her hair was dark as night, soft as silk, and shining as the glossy plumage of the raven; and it was parted above a forehead somewhat projecting, but high and spotless. Her eyebrows might have been considered too thick by any one disposed to be hypercritical; and they certainly imparted an air of masculine decision to her countenance. But then, they were so well divided, so nobly arched, so admirably semicircular, and so faultlessly pencilled that they were broader in the middle than at the ends.

Her ears were small, well folded, and having a delicate tinge of red; and nothing could exceed the beauty of the well-shaped neck, long, soft, easy, and flexibly swanlike.

Her bust was of the most exquisite proportions, neither too much elevated, nor too much depressed, and with the bosoms rising gently into moderate contours, firm and distinctly separated. She was tall in stature; her figure was slender and with softly flowing outlines unequalled for graceful symmetry, and there was about her an air of elegance, entirely her own, and totally apart from the splendour by which she was surrounded.

She was dressed in charming *déshabillé*. A tasteful cap set off with its snowy whiteness the raven blackness of her hair; a pale silk wrapper, open at the breast and trimmed with the finest lace, was gathered negligently around her form, the shape of which it rather developed than concealed; and the small, shapely feet, thrust into satin slippers, peeped forth from beneath the flowing drapery.

This lady was Eleanor, Countess of Desborough; and her husband, the earl, was a fine, handsome man, in his fortieth year.

Nevertheless, she had not married him from love. She had been sacrificed to him on account of his enormous wealth; for he was one of the largest of those few favoured thousands who, by an atrocious system, retained in their possession the entire soil of England. Possessed of vast estates in Hertfordshire and Derbyshire, and a princely mansion in each of those counties, having likewise a perfect palatial residence in Berkeley Square, and owning entire streets in the metropolis, in addition to being an extensive fundholder, the Earl of Desborough might have been well deemed an excellent match by avaricious, selfish, and interested parents. But he had long remained unmarried, to the wonder of all his friends and the annoyance of mammas who had grown-up daughters and who marvelled when he would make his selection. At length, after having passed the best years of his life in "single blessedness," he was smitten with the charms of Lady Eleanor Sefton. This was about six years previously to the date at which our tale opened; and her ladyship was at that time attached to the person of the Princess Sophia, then a young girl of only twelve. The earl proposed to Lady Eleanor, whose affections were certainly disengaged, but who felt that she could not love him. Her parents, however, — being more proud than wealthy, — compelled her to accompany him to the altar; and thus, at the age of two and twenty, the charming brunette, full of all the ardent fires of a glowing temperament and a vigorous youthfulness, was sacrificed to a man for whom she entertained not the slightest particle of affection. Six years had passed since this union, which was unblessed by offspring; and although to the world the noble pair appeared contented and happy in their marriage state, yet their private life seemed to tell another and far different tale. For they occupied not the same sleeping-apartment; and the domestics in their service were wont to whisper to their friends, in gossiping moods, that the earl and countess had never slept together since the first month of their alliance.

We should here observe, ere we resume the thread of our narrative, that the Earl of Desborough had adopted and brought up an orphan niece. This young lady was, at the period of which we are writing, in her eighteenth year; and she was as remarkable for the beauty of her person as for the masculine energy of her character, ungovernable passions, impetuous disposition, and vindictive nature. But she was not now an inmate of the mansion in Berkeley Square; neither was she at either of her uncle's country-seats in Derbyshire or Hertfordshire. It was reported that the Honourable Miss Fernanda Aylmer — for that was her name — had accompanied some of her noble relative's friends on a tour in Italy; and this story was generally believed, inasmuch as it was supposed that her mind required change of scene on account of a disappointment in love which rumour alleged her to have experienced. Whether the facts really were as currently stated, will presently appear; in the meantime, we return to the Countess of Desborough.

It was, as we observed at the opening of this chapter, about two o'clock in the afternoon; and her ladyship was reclining in a negligent manner upon the sofa. A book, which she had been reading, lay near her; and the heading of the open pages showed that it was not one of the flimsy novels of the day, nor one of the licentious magazines then so much in vogue, but a work of sterling merit and value, the study of which indicated the taste and mental capacity of the countess.

She had only returned from Hertfordshire, in company with her husband, the evening before; and, being wearied with travelling, she had risen later than usual. Thus was it that, although the hour had already arrived when visitors might be expected, she was still in her elegant negligee, and indeed experienced that lassitude which subdued all inclination to go through the tedious ceremony of the toilet.

The timepiece on the mantel had struck two, when the door slowly opened, and the Earl of Desborough entered the room.

We have already said that he was a fine, handsome person; we may add that his demeanour was pleasant, his conversation agreeable, and his manners affable and gracious. Even to those whom he looked upon as his inferiors, he exhibited not the pride and hauteur which usually characterize the English aristocracy; but he possessed a calm dignity, which circumstances might subdue into an air of conciliation and encouragement calculated to relieve the diffident of all awkwardness or embarrassment in his presence. In politics he was as liberal as a peer dared be in those times or as a British nobleman ever possibly could be; and a naturally generous disposition rendered him charitable and bounteous toward those who made their sufferings known to him. Altogether, he was a man whom, to outward appearances, Eleanor might have tutored her heart to love; and, judging in the same superficial way, such an alliance seemed fully and completely adapted to ensure her happiness.

But it was not so; and a cold, imperceptible tremor swept over her frame the instant that the earl appeared upon the threshold of the apartment.

" Pardon me if I intrude, Eleanor," he said, in a somewhat mournful voice, and speaking in a tone of embarrassment, not with the frank and noble confidence of a husband. " I inquired if you were alone before I ventured thus to break upon your privacy."

" Has not your lordship the *right* to visit me at your own good pleasure? " asked the countess, in a cold tone and with a marked emphasis upon the word printed in italics.

" Oh, the right — wherefore do you speak to me with such bitter, painfully significant sarcasm? " exclaimed the earl, closing the door and advancing toward her. " Do you not think, Eleanor, that my own thoughts, my own reflections are a sufficient punishment to me for having been wicked and insane enough to link you to the side of a corpse?" he added, in a tone of ineffable anguish.

"My God! talk not to me thus, my lord!" interrupted the countess, with a shudder that was now painfully visible; and for a moment she turned deadly pale. Then the warm blood rushed to her cheeks as if she were ashamed at her own conduct. "Pray sit down, Francis," she said, forcing herself to assume a milder tone, and addressing her husband by his Christian name.

"Merciful heavens! what would I give to purchase an unvaried continuation of this kindness of manner which you have just shown toward me!" he said, evidently touched to his very heart's core even by that faint scintillation of a better feeling on the part of the woman whom he worshipped, whom he loved so madly.

"And would to God that I could always exercise a sufficient control over myself to enable me to treat you with that kindness which you seek to deserve at my hands," exclaimed Eleanor, gazing on him with a profound commiseration. "Oh, I am ungrateful, very ungrateful, Francis; I know that I am!" she continued, carried away by the sudden enthusiasm with which a sense of duty had inspired her. "You surround me with all the elements of happiness, my slightest wish is anticipated, my very path is paved with gold, and my relatives have been enriched by your bounty; and yet I am cold, reserved, cruel toward you, Francis, and you bear it all without a murmur! Oh, forgive me, my husband, forgive me!" she cried, throwing herself on her knees at his feet, and joining her white hands imploringly. "Forgive me, I say, and in future I will endeavour to prove grateful and kind, as you yourself are generous and good."

The earl started from the seat which he had taken, and for a few moments was so bewildered and amazed by this proceeding on the part of his wife that he knew not how to act nor what to say. His fine, tall, manly form, of noble proportions and commanding air, was drawn up to its full height; and his large handsome blue eyes were bent upon the beauteous woman who thus knelt before him as a weeping suppliant. For the tears were streaming down her cheeks, and her red lips, parted with the beseeching expression which her countenance had assumed, revealed the faultless teeth, white as the pearls of the East. He beheld, too, the polished and exquisitively shaped arms, thrust forth from the large sleeves of the negligent wrapper, the hands uniting insensibly with those arms as in the statue of the Venus de Medici. Yes, thus might his looks embrace the charms of his lovely wife; but, although at length he recovered self-possession enough to raise her from her knees, he embraced her not, neither did he even offer so much as to touch her forehead with his lips.

"Say, will you pardon me, Francis?" she exclaimed, sinking back upon the sofa.

"Just Heaven! it is for me to implore your forgiveness, Eleanor!" he said, his countenance expressing all the agony that rent his soul.

"No, it is for me!" she responded, emphatically. "I have been unkind, ungenerous toward you; but, believe me, I have never failed to appreciate all that is good and great in your disposition, all that is noble and elevated in your character. Heaven knows that I have reasoned with myself so often, oh, so often, that I wonder how I have not yet succeeded in tutoring my mind to the entertainment of other thoughts, other ideas, other sentiments toward you. But you cannot put faith in what I now tell you, you cannot understand the sincerity of my sorrow and remorse; you remember that the present scene is but a repetition of many former ones, and you look upon me as capricious, changeable, and vacillating. Yes, yes, such are your impressions, Francis, and you are justified in thinking thus of me."

As these last words fell from the lips of the countess, she covered her face with her hands, and the pearly tears trickled between her long, taper fingers.

There was a pause, a silence in that room; and then a sob — a half-stifled sob — came floating upon the lady's ear.

She started, raised her head, and looked rapidly toward her husband. He had reseated himself; both his elbows rested upon the table, and his hands supported his face, which they likewise concealed. He was evidently wrestling against emotions profoundly excited — but vainly wrestling; for his chest heaved convulsively, and the strong, powerful, vigorous man was weeping like a child.

Oh, not for another instant could the naturally generous-hearted Eleanor brook this moving spectacle; but, springing toward him, she tore his hands away from his countenance, she raised his head, and pressing her lips to his forehead, while the tears rained down from her long dark lashes upon his cheeks, she murmured, "Forgive me, Francis, forgive me! I am a wretch to have tortured you thus!"

"It was your kindness, your goodness which unmanned me, adorable woman!" he exclaimed, pressing her in his arms. "It was the mercy you showed toward me that awakened all the tenderest feelings of my soul!"

He remained seated, and his beautiful wife stood by his side, leaning upon him with one arm thrown around his neck, and one hand pressing his own to her lips, while her eyes, usually of such dazzling lustre, contemplated his handsome features with a melting softness and a mournful tenderness.

"Never again ask me to forgive you, Eleanor," said the nobleman; "for I have so much for which to implore your pardon. But you can form no idea of the extent of that love which I bear for you, and which rendered me so diabolically selfish as to seal your misery by making you mine. Never, never shall I forget the first time that I beheld you. An enchantment was upon me, the very atmosphere which you breathed was intoxicating, the air through which you seemed to float in the mazy dance was fraught with ravishment. My senses were enthralled, my spirit was bathed in a fount of love. I went home, and then came the terrible reflection that you never could be mine, although the sweetest reminiscences of my life would ever be associated with your image. Like Orpheus, I could cherish the memory and in imagination look upon the shade of her whom I loved; but the deep and impassable gulf appeared to be still between us. Again I saw you, and we were introduced to each other. Then did I comprehend all that celestial passion which poets love to paint; I felt all its mystic influence, thrilling me like an Elysian essence, and I sat like one enchanted by your side, gazing in respectful admiration upon you. You spoke, and your voice fell like soft music on my ear; and when some one came to lead you off to the dance, it seemed to me as if a delicious melody which had enchained my senses were passing away. Again I went home, to ponder throughout the livelong night on your image. And then I was madman enough to think and to hope that there might be such a sentiment as a love of divine nature, apart from gross enjoyment, and existing rather as an essence than a sensuousness. And I fancied that if I made you my wife, surrounded you with every element of happiness which wealth could purchase, anticipated all your slightest wishes, ministered unto you the most delicate yet unwearied attentions, converted you into the goddess of my incessant worship, elevated you as the divinity to which it would be my only joy and desire to kneel, and studied your felicity even to those minute details that embrace the veriest trifles which the most affectionate husbands are prone to overlook, I flattered myself, I say, that if I did all this, you would appreciate my good intentions, you would become contented with your lot, and you would regard me with a generous compassion, if not with friendship. Your love I could not hope to gain; and yet there were moments when the starry wings of my imagination wafted me, in delicious visions, away from this gross earth, and taught me to believe that a young, amiable, and intellectual woman, placed in the midst of the glowing feelings and gentle fascinations which my idolatry toward her was calculated to engender, would have perhaps learned even to love the man who thus undertook to make her welfare and her happiness his sole and constant care."

By degrees, as the Earl of Desborough gave utterance to these sentiments in a tone plaintively touching, the countess grew deeply, deeply interested in the language that thus conveyed such ingenuous revelations; her whole attention became absorbed in words which, though spoken with no sinister intent, but in the spirit of manly frankness and candour, had the effect of a powerful appeal to her feelings; and when, toward the close, they assumed the air and expression of a gentle reproach and a tender upbraiding, the conviction gradually stole upon her that she was unworthy of even the notice of the man in whose mind dwelt such elevated thoughts and such chastening ideas. The tint of the rose reappeared upon her cheeks which the former emotions had left so pale; and that hue, deepening rapidly as the sense of shame grew stronger in her breast, flushed into a glowing crimson which overspread her countenance, her neck, her very bosom.

" Francis," she said, in a low and solemn voice, as she bent over him in such a way that he could not see her blushing cheeks, although he felt the gentle pressure of her warm arm around his neck, " I am humiliated, ashamed, confused, to an extent which you cannot possibly understand. What can I say, what can I do to convince you that I am thus profoundly touched? You have made me comprehend all the grossness of my mortal nature; you have forced me to regard and study my own imagination in all its impurity, my soul in all its sensuousness. And yet, though possessing an ardent temperament, and at times devoured by desires and rendered restless by fierce passions, I take the Almighty to witness that I am pure and chaste in body. I call Heaven to hear the solemn oath which I pledge to you that never, never have I proved faithless to the vows breathed by my lips at the altar."

" Hush! not a word more, Eleanor, dearest Eleanor! " cried the earl, springing from his chair and straining her to his breast. " It were a flagrant insult toward you, were I even to thank you for an assurance on a point regarding which I was already assured. Never, no, not for a single instant, have I suspected that the rich offering of your virgin affections has been surrendered to another; and it is the conviction of your chastity which enhances into a worship, an idolatry the love that I bear you. Oh, yes, it is for this that I have made you the goddess of my adoration; and when I am not in your presence, my thoughts are with you all the same. Your image is never absent from my memory; but when I think of that wilful, wicked selfishness on my part, or rather, those vain and fanciful imaginings, which prompted me to make you my victim, my very soul is wrung with the agony and crucifixion of remorse. Oh, my beloved, my adored Eleanor, grant me your compassion, your sympathy, your commiseration. Despise me not, suffer not your heart to loathe and abhor me; and when the sense of your own unhappiness steals irresistibly upon you, when, in gazing around, you behold wives who can be proud of their husbands and rejoice in a smiling progeny, then curse me not in the depths of your sickening spirit, but pause for a moment to reflect that I also am unhappy."

The earl had spoken to this length without interruption, for the countess was almost suffocated by the feelings which his pathetic and touching language inspired. Her head sank upon his shoulder; he felt her bosom throbbing against his arm like the swell and reflux of a mighty tide, and her tears rained down upon his vesture.

But this evidence of a warm and generous disposition on her part only rendered his remorse the more poignant, crushing his very soul as beneath the weight of centuries; for more vividly than ever was forced upon his mind the conviction that his selfishness or his sophistry had demanded and obtained the sacrifice of a lovely woman, animated with all the ecstatic fires of youth, sensitive to the seductions of an ardent temperament, and yet able from a sense of duty to subdue the longings of her impassioned nature and the cravings of her glowing imagination.

Thus, while his heart cherished a very paradise of love for this adorable being, his brain was convulsed with ever-recurring paroxysms of sorrow and remorse; and while the new-born tenderness which she now manifested toward him thrilled in transport through his veins, he shuddered because he feared lest it should have kindled suddenly only to expire rapidly.

" Francis, my good, kind husband," murmured the soft, melting voice of the countess in his ear, " will you not believe me when I assure you that our conversation of this day has changed me altogether? Will you not suffer yourself to hope that I can henceforth behave to you in a manner which may become at least a slight atonement for the past? I am well aware that I have made these promises before, that your language has on many, many occasions melted me into a softness which has led to similar vows and pledges. But never was the impression so deep as it is now, never did I comprehend your character so fully as I can read it at present."

" I could fall on my knees and worship you for these assurances, Eleanor! " exclaimed the earl, yielding to the tide of delight on which his soul was now borne along. " Oh, then the flowers of my fancy are not dead, and the hopes which I had formed may yet be realized. You will love me as if I were a dear parent, a brother, or a friend; and I shall continue to worship you as my goddess, as the idol of my devotion."

And, drawing her upon his breast, the earl imprinted kisses on her brow, her cheeks, and her lips; but those kisses were as chaste and pure as sisters bestow on each other, — gentle caresses, and not the long, ardent, and impassioned enjoyments of a love kindling with desire. Nevertheless the lady, unable to restrain the natural ardour of her temperament, clung fervently to him, with her arms embracing his neck tenaciously, almost violently. But, gently disengaging himself from her embrace, he with difficulty subdued the profound sigh that rose from his very heart's core; while Eleanor, resuming her seat on the sofa, blushed through shame at the evidence of an indomitable sensuality into which her passion had betrayed her.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE HONOURABLE ARTHUR EATON

There was a long pause, during which the earl and countess struggled to subdue the various emotions which animated them; and at length the former said, " It was relative to my unhappy niece, dear Eleanor, that I came to seek an interview with you this afternoon."

" Have you heard any unpleasant tidings concerning her? " inquired the countess, in a tone which expressed the interest she took in the young lady alluded to.

" No, reassure yourself on that point," answered the Earl of Desborough; " and again and again let me thank you for the tender solicitude which you have ever manifested in her behalf."

" You love her as if she were your own child," observed Eleanor; " and when I became your wife I adopted her as such."

" And had she followed your counsel and example, she would never have brought dishonour on herself," added the earl, emphatically. " Oh, when I think of the necessity, the terrible necessity, which has compelled us to place the young girl in such a hateful, detestable retirement, it is enough to drive me to despair. But the intelligence which I have now to impart to you, Eleanor, is somewhat of a cheering nature."

" Delay not, then, to communicate such welcome tidings," exclaimed the countess.

" I have this morning received a letter from the Honourable Arthur Eaton," continued the earl. " It appears that, accompanied by his father, he arrived in town last evening; and he has written to me to implore an interview this afternoon. I have accorded his request, and in half an hour he will be here," added the nobleman, referring to his watch.

" But for what purpose can the unprincipled young man have solicited this interview? " asked the countess, amazed by the intelligence.

" This letter briefly explains the motive," responded the earl. " Feeling the very foundations of his existence breaking up, and conscious that some unknown but terrible malady is hurrying him to the tomb, he has been stricken with remorse, and he proposes to render his victim an act of justice which will at least prove his contrition and enable Fernanda to return into society without the blush of conscious shame upon her cheeks."

" This intelligence would be indeed welcome," exclaimed the countess, " were I convinced that Fernanda possesses a disposition of a nature calculated to admit of such a compromise. For I need scarcely remind you that she is a being who can pursue no middle course; all her passions and sentiments verge into extremes. Madly has she loved Arthur Eaton once, profoundly does she hate him now. A few months back, and she would have died to save him from even the slightest pang; but when the fatal conviction burst upon her that she was betrayed by a faithless seducer, she vowed that she would devote herself to a deadly vengeance."

" It must be for you to reason with her, Eleanor," observed the nobleman. " In a few minutes Mr. Eaton will be here, and in the evening, if you can make it convenient, you might pay a visit as privately and secretly as possible to my unhappy niece."

" Nothing shall prevent me," answered the countess. " But you must now excuse me for a few minutes, while I make some change in my toilet, as I cannot receive Mr. Eaton in this *déshabillé.*"

The lady quitted the room; and in about a quarter of an hour she returned, dressed in an elegant manner. If she were charming in her negligent attire, she was now superbly handsome in the dark velvet dress which she wore. Her hair, previously arranged in massive bands, now fell in locks of raven brightness upon her naked shoulders; and instead of the negligent morning cap, pearls as beautiful and as costly as those of Cleopatra encircled her polished brow. The exquisite grace of her form, the statuesque carriage of the arching neck and well-proportioned bust, the elegance of her movements, and the mild, though dignified expression which animated her features, all combined to render her a being of whom an adoring husband might well be proud.

Scarcely had the Countess of Desborough resumed her seat on the sofa, when a domestic, attired in a sumptuous livery, — that disgusting trumpery which degrades the man into the menial, and which, thank God! the noble-minded Americans have cast off from amongst them, — threw open the door of the apartment, and announced the Honourable Mr. Eaton.

The only son of Lord Marchmont was, as we have already stated, about three and twenty years of age. He was tall, and naturally slender, but now so thin that there was something spectral in his appearance. His hair was dark and curly; his eyes, of a corresponding hue, were large and searching, fascinating the beholder with their extraordinary brilliancy. But it was the light of fever that shone thus superhumanly in them; and when observed in contrast with the emaciated and colourless cheeks, the thin lips, the natural richness of whose red had been subdued into a faint rose-tint, and the general appearance of sickness, attenuation, and decay which marked the unfortunate young man, the effect produced was shocking in the extreme.

Retaining the air of youthfulness, he seemed to have entered suddenly on the term of caducity without having passed his prime, and likewise without falling into decrepitude. He still walked upright; there was not a wrinkle upon his brow, not a streak of snow on his dark and silky hair; nor was there a speck to mar the brilliancy of his even and perfect teeth. And yet he was wasting away, gliding onward to the tomb with a rapidity that might almost be seen.

The Earl and Countess of Desborough rose and received the visitor with a reserve the coldness of which was less intense than they meant it to be; for grievous as was the wrong which he had inflicted upon Fernanda Aylmer, they could not help being touched by the change, the awful change, which had taken place in Arthur Eaton since last they saw him.

A few months ago, and he was a fine, handsome young man, vigorous in the enjoyment of that spring-time of his existence when the sanguine imagination, elate with hope, decks out the world in all its brightest hues, and fancies that

Time, in its onward flight, will never fail to scatter flowers from his brow and diamonds from his wing.

But now — oh, now — what a spectral being was that to bask in the sunshine of aristocratic grandeur, to breathe the ambrosial air of a lordly mansion, or to sit down at the banquet where the roseate floods of luxury were poured forth! Already did he seem as if about to take the one short step which separated his feet from the verge of the grave; already did he appear as if on the point of seeking a refuge in the tomb, — that silent shore on which the last wave of human life flows, never to ebb again.

Mr. Eaton sank upon a chair even before he was invited to be seated, for the mere exertion of ascending from his carriage in the street to that apartment on the first floor had been followed by a general lassitude and weakness throughout the entire frame, so that he felt as if his back were about to break and his limbs to snap asunder beneath him.

" I know not how to find words to express my gratitude for the goodness which has prompted your lordship to grant me this interview," began the young invalid, speaking in a low and faint, but not disagreeable voice; " and the presence of her ladyship at the same time is an additional encouragement — But tell me of my poor wronged Fernanda," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, and speaking with some degree of excitement.

" The subject is a most painful one, Mr. Eaton," said the earl; " and yet, considering the object of your visit, it is necessary to enter into full particulars. Fernanda has been residing for some weeks past in the strictest retirement. Within the last three days she gave birth to a still-born child. The evidence of her shame is not therefore in existence."

" It would be a wretched affectation on my part," observed Mr. Eaton, " were I to express any sorrow at this result. But, tell me, my lord, or you, my lady, tell me whether Fernanda will accept the tardy reparation which I propose to make her."

" I fear that it will be no easy task to persuade her to accept your hand," replied the countess; " and, since you have appealed to me, it would be alike wrong and foolish not to enumerate all the difficulties which are to be encountered in carrying out your design. Profound and sincere as was Fernanda's love for you, deep and fervent as it must have been to enable you to triumph over her virtue, it nevertheless survives no longer."

"And she hates me — she hates me!" exclaimed Arthur, a hectic tinge appearing, faint and evanescent, upon his cheeks. "Oh, yes, your ladyship need not attempt to conceal the truth from me, for I am well acquainted with Fernanda's disposition; I can imagine every phase of her character. Ardently as she has loved, with equal bitterness can she hate. In the same way that she would surrender her life to prove her affection, so would she make any sacrifice to wreak her revenge. You see that I understand her well; and I know that I have wronged her, cruelly wronged her. But, as God is my judge, I loved her in the beginning as fervently as she loved me, and she became the victim to no settled scheme of seduction. My crime was not premeditated; in the ardour of an impassioned moment I became too bold, and she too weak, and her dishonour was the result. And it was not altogether because I had thus experienced the rights of a husband without having bestowed on her the title of a wife, — it was not on this account alone that I began to repent of my vows and pledges; but it was also because her imperious disposition would brook no control, because, in her changing humours, she sought to render me the victim of her caprices, and because her jealousy and suspicion knew no bounds."

The Honourable Mr. Eaton paused to gather breath; for the animation with which he spoke had exhausted him.

"I will frankly and honestly confess," he resumed, at length, "that were I still in the full vigour of youthful health, I should not perhaps have sought to make amends to Fernanda for the injury I have inflicted upon her. I do not believe that we were formed for each other. The more our respective thoughts, feelings, habits, and passions were displayed and developed to each other, the greater appeared the dissimilitude between our minds, the more marked grew the unfitness of our union. But now," he continued, in a tone of deep pathos, "now that the tide of my existence is so rapidly ebbing away, bearing on its bosom all the relics of a youthfulness so early wrecked, the shattered remnants of my affections, my hopes, and my aspirations, now, in a word, that my footsteps are carrying me with such frightful speed to an early grave, there is scarcely merit on my part in making any sacrifice for Fernanda's sake, whereas, on her side, it would be insane were she to refuse the honourable title of a wife. Alas! she would soon become a widow, and then, without shame, could she in due time bestow her hand on some happier object of her affections."

"It certainly is not our wish to reproach you for the past, Arthur," said the Earl of Desborough, much affected by the young man's language, while the countess sought not to restrain nor to conceal her tears; "and your present conduct," added the nobleman, "deserves our commendation, yes, even our gratitude. Believe me, therefore, that nothing shall be omitted by Lady Desborough or myself, nothing left unessayed, in order to induce Fernanda to perform that which now becomes a duty."

"And if persuasion be required to move her, my lord," said Arthur, "think you that if I were to present myself to her in the retirement where she has been placed, exhibit to her the wretched, wasted being that I am, bid her gaze upon my colourless cheeks and my fire-fevered eyes, — oh, if I were to do this, and even fall upon my knees before her, demanding that pardon which a man upon his death-bed has a right to entreat and expect at the hands of even his bitterest enemy, — were I to do all this, she never could refuse to grant my prayer and suffer me to lead her to the altar."

The countess exchanged a rapid glance with her husband, whose look conveyed an affirmative sympathetically responsive to her own thoughts; and, turning toward the Honourable Mr. Eaton, she said: "This evening at eight o'clock you shall accompany me to the place where Fernanda is residing. But as the visit must be strictly private, and it would be as inconvenient for me to go with you in your carriage as for you to occupy a seat in mine, — in a word, as this proceeding on our part must not be known to any of our dependents, — I will proceed with the earl at seven o'clock to make a call at St. James's Palace, and at eight we will meet you, Mr. Eaton, in Pall Mall. You will have a hackney-coach in attendance; and I will then accompany you to Fernanda's present abode."

The earl signified his approval of this project and Mr. Eaton took a temporary leave of the noble pair.

CHAPTER XL

ELEANOR AND THE PRINCE

Half an hour had elapsed since the departure of Lord Marchmont's afflicted son, and the Countess of Desborough was now once more alone, her husband having left her until dinner-time.

Reclining upon the sofa, Eleanor gave way to the reflections which the main incident of the afternoon had excited within her: we allude to that singular and painful interview which she had with the earl.

She revolved in her mind everything he had said to her; she repeated to herself, as nearly as she could recollect, all the glowing words in which he had described his love, the pathetic terms in which he had depicted his remorse, and the noble language which he had uttered in drawing a distinction between an etherial and æsthetic sentiment on the one hand, and a gross, sensual passion on the other. But her meditations brought her at length to the termination of the whole scene, when he imprinted chaste kisses on her lips, and when she felt as if lightning circulated in her veins, so powerful were the longings of her desires.

Again did those sensations steal upon her; and she blushed, although alone, at the sway which her ardent temperament exercised over her. She was ashamed and humiliated at the idea of being unable to wrestle against the voluptuous cravings that caused her bosom to pant, and her cheeks to glow, and her pulse to thrill. Invoking the aid of her virtue against the promptings of her nature, striving to assist the intellectual and spiritual to assert their triumph over the gross and the material, arming herself with all the pride and dignity of her sex to combat against that sex's mysterious longings, the noble lady's very soul was rent with conflicting emotions;

and the struggle irresistibly led her on into repinings against the destiny which thus made her the victim of so fierce a conflict between the spirit and the flesh.

It was at the moment when the heightened colour of her cheeks, the subdued lustre of her magnificent eyes, now swimming in a soft languor, and the rapid heavings of her bosom gave an indescribable charm to her entire appearance, that the door of the apartment was thrown open, and the lace-bedizened domestic announced his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

Composing herself as well as she was able, the Countess of Desborough advanced to meet the heir apparent, who, after the usual compliments, handed her back to the sofa whence she had risen, and took a seat by her side.

"There is no chance, I hope, of interruption on the part of the earl?" said the prince; then, instantly perceiving that the observation had excited the surprise of the countess, he hastened to add, "because I wish to speak to your ladyship on a subject of no ordinary importance."

"The earl will not return until six o'clock," answered Eleanor; "and it is now half-past four," she remarked, glancing at the timepiece on the mantel.

"Your ladyship is doubtless astonished at the announcement I have already made, respecting the importance of the matter which has brought me hither this afternoon," continued the prince, scarcely knowing how to open the subject that was uppermost in his mind. "But I am sure, I feel convinced," he exclaimed, with some degree of abruptness, "that your ladyship will meet my inquiries with candour and frankness."

Had not the countess been conscious of one incident which by its importance afforded a clue to the meaning of the prince's allusion, she might have thought that his Royal Highness was about to address her in the language of love; but there was a certain excitement in his voice as well as an embarrassment in his manner that engendered in her bosom the worst fears on behalf of a lady to whom she was deeply attached.

"It is consistent with my nature and also with my duty to behave frankly toward your Royal Highness," she observed, after a few moments' reflection.

"You already divine the object of my visit!" exclaimed the prince; then, glancing hastily around the apartment, he said, in a more subdued tone, " Is it possible that our discourse may be overheard? "

" Not the slightest apprehension need be entertained on that head," was the immediate response given by the countess.

" Your ladyship is the depositress of a secret, a terrible secret, involving the honour of one of the royal family of England," resumed the Prince of Wales, fixing a searching look upon Eleanor's countenance, from which all the colour immediately fled.

" Does not your Royal Highness think that it were better to leave such a secret in the oblivion where prudence has sought to bury it? " she asked, in a low and tremulous tone; for she saw that it was useless to attempt a denial of the circumstance to which he alluded.

" Think you that I am anxious to publish my own sister's shame? " he demanded, in a voice which showed how deeply his pride was wounded, and how humiliated he felt on account of the dishonour that had fallen on a relative so near to him. " No, such is not my intention; but I am desirous to learn all the circumstances connected with this most distressing incident."

" It were useless to probe those circumstances now, since all possible precautions have been adopted to cover them with an impervious veil," said the Countess of Desborough.

" And yet your ladyship perceives that, in spite of these precautions, a whisper has reached my ears, conveying to me the startling intelligence of the dishonour of my sister."

There was a mixture of irony and vexation in the tone and manner of the prince, which struck the countess with the truth and justice of his observation. For, notwithstanding all the measures which prudence had suggested and which the command of unlimited resources had enabled her to carry into execution, her royal friend's secret had indeed transpired by some mysterious and at present unaccountable means.

" Let me convince you," resumed the heir apparent, " that I am better acquainted with the outline of this unfortunate occurrence than your ladyship imagines. A carriage breaks down late one evening in the Edgeware Road; the Princess Sophia and the Countess of Desborough take refuge in a neighbouring dwelling. The princess adopted the name of Mrs. Mordaunt, the Countess of Desborough assumes that of Mrs. Smith."

"Is it possible that those young ladies could have discovered whom we were?" exclaimed Eleanor, her thoughts and her suspicions instantly settling upon Octavia and Pauline Clarendon. "Can they have been base enough to make the circumstance a subject for vulgar scandal and detestable gossip? If this be the case, never more shall I believe that the countenance is an index of the mind; for candour, sincerity, and artlessness were stamped upon the features of those girls."

"Blame them not; do them not so much injustice," said the Prince of Wales. "Being altogether unacquainted with them, except by name, it is not from their lips that the whispers have reached me; and I can likewise assert, upon the same good authority whence I did receive the astounding and distressing intelligence, that those young ladies have religiously kept the secret of which accident rendered them the depositresses."

"The surgeon, Mr. Thurston, could he have betrayed the unhappy princess?" murmured the countess, in a musing tone.

"No, Mr. Thurston merits not your blame," observed his Royal Highness. "Indeed, I am tolerably well assured that neither he nor the young ladies have ever entertained the slightest suspicion who Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. Smith really were. I shall not tell your ladyship how I became acquainted with the circumstance which we are discussing. Suffice it to say, that my informant is as trustworthy as yourself — "

"Something strikes me!" ejaculated the countess, suddenly. "When the travelling-barouche broke down, a man — perhaps a gentleman — assisted the princess's lady's-maid to alight, and then opened the door to aid us to descend. But he disappeared abruptly, and in the confusion of that moment, as well as in the excitement of the subsequent occurrences, all recollection of his evanescent presence was completely absorbed. It was that individual, then, who was your Royal Highness's informant," added Eleanor, with a marked emphasis.

"I will not deny the fact, since you have thus cleverly divined the truth," said the prince; "but that person will never divulge the secret to another."

"And yet he could not have informed your Royal Highness of everything," exclaimed the Countess of Desborough; "because, although he might have recognized the princess and me in the carriage, it was impossible for him to perceive the situation in which my beloved companion so unfortunately found herself."

"He remained in the neighbourhood and kept a strict watch all night long," said the prince, determined to avert suspicion from Octavia relative to the authorship of the information he had received. "He saw the surgeon sent for, he knew that a child was born during the night, and as he was well aware that your ladyship could have no motive in concealing the birth of an infant of your own, he naturally concluded that it was my unhappy sister who — "

"Enough!" exclaimed the countess, imperiously. "I again declare that I can discover no advantage in discussing this most painful subject. Your Royal Highness admits the secret to be safe in all quarters; let me therefore implore you not to disinter it from so desirable an oblivion. I love the Princess Sophia as if she were my own sister, I enjoy her confidence, and I have done my duty. Surely your Royal Highness has not come hither to upbraid me for the part which I enacted throughout that trying scene?"

"God forbid!" ejaculated the prince. "On the contrary, my deepest gratitude is due to your ladyship."

"In this case, your Royal Highness will grant me the boon I am about to solicit?" observed Eleanor, hastily.

"Speak!" said the heir apparent, his eyes now dwelling with admiration upon the countenance to which excitement had brought back all the glowing hues of health and beauty.

"My prayer is that your Royal Highness will not reveal to the Princess Sophia your knowledge of her secret," answered the countess. "Oh, she would die through shame were she even to harbour a suspicion that her weakness, or rather, her unfortunate love and its consequences, should be known to the brother of whom she stands so much in awe."

"I promise your ladyship not only this, but anything else that you may choose to ask of me and which I may have the power to perform," replied the voluptuary, assuming a significant tenderness of tone and manner which Eleanor could not avoid noticing, but which she affected not to perceive. "There is one point, however, which you must clear up, beauteous lady," he continued, after a few moments' pause; "and we will then change the conversation, nay, more, we will consign the topic to oblivion, at least so far as words are concerned."

"And that point?" said the countess, interrogatively.

"The name of the individual in whose arms my sister forgot her duty and her chastity," was the prompt reply. "You will reveal that secret to me — "

"Never!" ejaculated Eleanor, in a determined tone. "Your Royal Highness must indeed entertain a despicable opinion of me to imagine even for an instant that I should betray the illustrious princess who has honoured me with her confidence, and whose friendship I enjoy."

And the magnificent eyes of the lady flashed forth the fires of indignation and wounded pride.

"Pardon me, lovely countess, pardon me!" exclaimed the prince, falling on his knees at her feet, and seizing one of her hands, which he pressed to his lips.

Eleanor was so amazed and bewildered by this sudden action on his part, that she had not presence of mind sufficient to enable her immediately to withdraw her hand; and the royal voluptuary, who never entertained a very high opinion of female virtue, pressed that fair hand all the more warmly to his lips, with the idea that it was now voluntarily abandoned to him.

For an instant living lightning seemed to circulate with thrilling transport through the veins of the lady, and an ineffable sensation of bliss seized upon her; but in another moment her virtue triumphed over the ardour of her nature, and, snatching back her hand, she exclaimed, "Your Royal Highness forgets who I am!"

The dignity of this reproach, the tone in which it was uttered, and the manner with which it was accompanied, would have covered with confusion and shame any other libertine than the Prince of Wales. But being accustomed to an almost unprecedented success amongst women, and setting little value upon the first display of resistance to his will, he was unabashed by the reproof which he now experienced.

"Never will I rise from my knees, dearest lady," he exclaimed, " until you declare that you have pardoned me for the rudeness, nay, the insult which I offered to you a few minutes ago. Tell me that I am forgiven! "

" To relieve myself from the embarrassment of the present proceeding, I at once comply with the demand of your Royal Highness," said the countess, in a cold and dignified manner. " Let the past, so far as it any way regards the late painful subject of our discourse, be buried in complete oblivion."

" A thousand thanks for this kind proposal," exclaimed the prince, rising from his knees, and resuming his seat upon the sofa. " But how was it, charming lady, that you appeared to be offended by the slight compliment which I ere now paid to your beauty and your amiability? Wherefore did you withdraw your hand as if it were in the grasp of some hideous monster? "

" Rather let me inquire wherefore your Royal Highness should imagine that I could have acted otherwise than as I did? " asked the countess, somewhat moved by the melting tone in which he spoke and by the tenderness of his manner.

" I must confess that I am utterly unworthy of any mark of favour at the hands of your ladyship," said the prince. " A being so radiant in beauty as yourself, enjoying a reputation which is like the spotless mirror whence the breath breathed on its pure surface passes rapidly away, endowed with an intellect as bright as your virtues are estimable, — such a being, I say, is so far above a poor miserable mortal like myself — "

" Surely your Royal Highness must be delivering a satire against me? " exclaimed the countess, scarcely knowing whether to be offended or to laugh, as this panegyric on herself, involving such an absurd contrast, was poured upon her ears.

" I never was more in earnest in my life! " cried the prince, in an impassioned tone. " I have observed you at the court. I have seen your lovely form moving in the mazes of the dance, and I now behold you by the domestic hearth; and you appear more beauteous in my eyes, in that comparatively simple dress, than when the diamonds on your brow glisten amidst the blazing lamps of fashion's busy scene. Think not that I am paying you an idle compliment, fancy not that I am offering up to you the incense of a passing flattery.

No, on my soul, sweet countess, I could again fall at your feet, I could worship you, only that I fear you would repulse my adoration with scorn and overwhelm me with reproaches."

"And you dare not venture to encounter this terrible wrath?" said the countess, smiling, while the warm blood rushed to her cheeks, for all the fires of her ardent nature were kindled rapidly by the burning and impassioned looks which the prince fixed upon her.

"Ah! then you could not be cruel toward me!" he exclaimed, devouring with those looks the charms which shone so resplendently in the mellowed lustre shed by the lamp on the table and the wax candles on the mantel; for lights were already burning in the room when his visit was announced.

"Believe me, your Royal Highness, that I am taking all you say as a series of very pretty compliments, for which, as in duty bound, I tender you my most grat ful thanks," said Eleanor, resolved to wrestle against the ardour of those passions which were exercising so powerful an influence over her; and therefore, in pursuance of this determination, she affected not to perceive the real drift of the prince's language.

"Oh, wherefore do you treat as a jest that which is so solemnly serious?" demanded the heir apparent; and, placing his hand upon his heart, he exclaimed, in a tone of enthusiasm, "By heaven! divine creature, I love you, and if you scorn this avowal of my passion, you will plunge me into despair!"

Thus speaking, he threw his arms around Eleanor's form and clasped her in a fervent embrace ere she could even recover from the surprise into which this sudden proceeding threw her; and in an instant his lips were pressed to hers, and the licentious transports which animated him were transfused, warm and impassioned, throughout her entire being. For a few moments she yielded to the profound sense of enjoyment that thus seized upon her, she allowed herself to be carried away on the flood of ecstatic feelings which engulfed her soul; and though she gave not back again that burning kiss, she nevertheless withdrew not the mouth to which it seemed to grow.

But when the prince, encouraged by this apparent abandon-ment of her person to him, sought to snatch further favours she violently disengaged herself from his arms, and, hurriedly arranging the bosom of her dress, which his daring hand had disturbed, she exclaimed, " Think not that you obtained the least particle of permanent advantage over me. Amazement, confusion, bewilderment rendered me weak for a moment; but your Royal Highness must not again venture to treat me with insult."

And, having thus spoken, she rang the bell.

" In the name of God! what do you mean, lovely countess? " demanded the prince, almost astounded by this proceeding, and likewise starting up from the sofa.

" Compose yourself," said Eleanor, with a calm and noble dignity; then, as the door opened and a domestic appeared, she exclaimed, " His Royal Highness desires that his carriage may immediately be drawn up to the door."

" His Royal Highness's carriage is in attendance, my lady," responded the lackey.

" You shall yet be mine, haughty beauty — I swear it! " whispered the prince, hurriedly, as he affected to bow in a ceremonious manner ere he took his departure.

" I thank your Royal Highness for the honour of this visit," said the countess aloud, so that the servant who held the door open observed not that anything unusual was taking place.

The prince darted upon Eleanor a looked of mingled licentiousness and menace, and quitted the room.

CHAPTER XLI

CAROLINE AND THE YOUNG LADY

WE must now return to the abode of Mrs. Lindley in Fore Street, Lambeth.

Three days had passed since that terrible night on which Caroline Walters had contemplated the horrors of the storeroom, and had heard the small shrill shriek of the new-born child whom the old harridan had so ruthlessly consigned to the dark depths of the turbid Thames.

It will be recollected that she had already cherished a sentiment of vengeance against the man who had seduced and betrayed her, and that she afterward united with that resolve a vow to seek some means of punishing the old midwife who had enacted the principal part in the appalling tragedy of that dreadful night.

During the three days which had elapsed since then, Caroline had pondered, deeply pondered, on those resolutions; and the more she meditated upon them, the more were they strengthened in her bosom. But she was at present powerless; and many weeks must probably elapse ere she would be again free and in a condition to enter upon the execution of her designs. Nor as yet had those designs assumed any settled shape in her imagination; she nursed them, she clung to them, but she must trust to accident to point out the way to carry them into effect.

At all events, for the time being it was necessary for her to maintain a calm, placid, and even contented demeanour in the presence of Mrs. Lindley and the young ladies who were her fellow lodgers in the accursed establishment, for she, poor girl, was so utterly friendless that she was compelled to submit to all the arrangements which Mrs. Brace had made for her; and, being in the way to become a mother, she naturally clung to the asylum, though vile and abhorrent it were, which had been provided for her against the time when the hour of suffering and the pangs of maternity should overtake her. But she nevertheless vowed within herself that if the child which was then moving in her bosom should be born alive, it should escape the murderous intentions which Mrs. Lindley doubtless had in store with regard to it.

The clock at Lambeth Palace had proclaimed the hour of six in the evening, and Caroline Walters was in conversation with her fellow lodgers in the sitting-room allotted to them generally, when an old nurse entered and summoned her to the presence of the midwife.

Caroline repaired to the parlour where Mrs. Lindley was seated; but she shuddered when the reptile-like gaze of that woman was fixed upon her, for never since the night of horrors had she met that look without experiencing a cold sensation, as if the hand of a corpse were passing slowly over her naked flesh.

" Shut the door, my dear child," said Mrs. Lindley, speaking in that subdued tone which had become habitual to her. " Hush! not so violently — remember there's an invalid up-stairs. And now sit down for a few moments; I wish to speak to you particularly."

Caroline took a chair, and awaited in silence the communication that was to follow.

" My dear girl," resumed Mrs. Lindley, caressing her great black cat, but still keeping her eyes steadily fixed on Miss Walters, " I have selected you from amongst the rest to undertake an office which may afford a little variety and change for you. You are aware that in the next chamber to yours a young lady has very recently become a mother. Fortunately for her, poor thing, the child was born dead — But what is the matter with you, my love? " suddenly exclaimed the midwife. " You appear to be unwell? "

" No, ma'am, it is nothing," hastily responded Caroline, who had been unable to subdue a shudder which was this time fully perceptible; for her whole frame had become convulsed on hearing the dreadful woman give utterance to so calm and deliberate a falsehood respecting the young lady's child. " It is nothing, I can assure you," repeated Miss Walters, fearful of exciting a suspicion that she knew the real truth regarding that murdered infant. " But what you were saying made me think that my time is rapidly approaching — "

"Hush!" murmured the midwife, placing her long lean finger to her thin pale lip, and contracting her thick and prominent eyebrows; "the very walls have ears, as I am constantly telling you all. But you must not give way to nervous apprehensions, my love; you must keep up your courage, and you will pass through the ordeal in safety. Recollect that I yield the palm of skill and success in midwifery to no living practitioner, male or female; and therefore it is fortunate for you that our dear kind friend, the excellent Mrs. Brace, has entrusted you to my care. However, let us return to what I was just now saying. We were speaking of the young lady who occupies the next chamber to yours. That young lady, as you have already been informed, is of high birth, and her name must continue to be veiled in the deepest mystery. She requires a companion, some one who will consent to pass a few hours with her each day, and who will neither seek to draw from her who she is, nor recognize her again should they ever meet hereafter in the great and busy world without. Poor creature! she feels sad and lonely, for the nurse is certainly no fitting associate; and I have so many things to attend to that I can give her but little of my company. Under all these circumstances I have determined to select you as the most genteel, most amiable, and most discreet of the young females from whom such a choice could be made."

"I shall cheerfully undertake the duty of rendering the time as agreeable as possible to the lady," said Caroline, both flattered and pleased at having been thus marked out for the task.

"You may, then, at once ascend to her chamber, my dear," returned Mrs. Lindley. "But, hark! — not a word to the others or they will be jealous; and they will likewise overwhelm you with impertinent questions whenever they see you. Let them believe that your habits have grown more retired, and that you love to seek the solitude of your own room. By producing this impression upon them, you may easily pass a few hours every day with the young lady, and not be observed by the rest. Do you comprehend me?"

"Perfectly, ma'am," answered Caroline; and she then withdrew from the midwife's parlour.

In the room to which the girl now ascended, a beauteous creature occupied a bed tastefully fitted up and of a more luxurious character than those in the other dormitories.

The young lady was about eighteen. Her eyes were not particularly large, and of the deepest violet blue, shaded by long jetty lashes, and capable of undergoing every variety of expression. When stormy and soul-piercing, they appeared to be black as night, and burning with an overwhelming lustre; and if eyes could slay, those were the orbs which might have had the power to shoot forth the fiery arrows of death. But when beaming with love, and melting and tender, these eyes were of a purple hue so exquisitely soft that it seemed as if they could never assume a look of wildness and fierceness, never menace with their vengeful glances, nor, sear with their lightning brilliancy.

Her hair was of a dark brown, of such glossy richness that it seemed of a fainter and more golden hue where the light rested upon it, and black where the shade remained. Her skin was of the purest, most snowy white, save where veined with the pale sapphire's tint; for the gentle hue of the rose which sat upon her cheeks when she was in health, had now fled, and yet her pallor was not ghastly nor corpselike, no, nor even sickly, though produced by indisposition, neither was it insipid, but it was interesting. And in strong contrast therewith was the perfectly scarlet richness of her lips, which denoted the warmth of her temperament and the ardour of her nature. The proudly rising throat, sloping shoulders, and well-developed contours of the bust were in harmony with a very slender waist and finely proportioned limbs; for though she was not above the middle stature of her sex, her symmetry was admirable.

Such was the young lady in whose presence Caroline Walters now found herself; and for a few instants she stood gazing upon her in mingled admiration and respect.

"Come near me, give me your hand," said the fair patrician, in a winning tone which immediately placed the young woman at her ease; and, advancing to the bed, she took the proffered hand, which she pressed cordially as if to imply a hope that they should agree well together. "Yes, we will be friends," added the lady, either divining what passed in the other's mind, or else struck by the same sentiment. "Your name is Caroline Walters. Mrs. Lindley told me that she should select you to be my companion. At present you must not seek to know who I am; but if I continue to like you as well as I do now under the influence of a first impression, I will make you my confidant, I will keep no secrets from you."

Caroline was moved almost to tears by the amiable softness which characterized the patrician's tone, looks, and manner as she thus spoke; and while the young woman gazed on that heavenly countenance, she could not conceive it possible that one so winning, so fascinating, and so tender could have connived at the foul tragedy which had been enacted on the night of whirlwind and of tempest.

Nevertheless, this was a point upon which Caroline had resolved to satisfy herself so soon as an opportunity should occur.

"Sit down by my side, my dear friend, for so I shall call you," resumed the lady, sinking back on the pillow whence she had raised herself on Caroline's entrance. "Let us endeavour to console each other. You have doubtless been deceived and betrayed by a villain, as I have been; you have perhaps loved as I have loved — "

"Oh, yes, my love was a worship, an idolatry!" exclaimed Caroline. "And now, nothing remains for me but — "

"Despair or vengeance!" murmured the patrician, in a tone so altered, so changed from that in which she had previously spoken, that Miss Walters started up in affright; for it struck her at the instant that some other voice had breathed those terrible words in the room.

"Yes, despair or vengeance," echoed Caroline, the moment she recovered her self-possession. "But it shall not be the former," she added, gloomily; then, fearing that she had said too much, the young woman hastened to observe, "I was, however, wrong to evince such a feeling, which can only tend to make you detest me — "

"Detest you!" ejaculated the patrician, starting up in her couch, a wild light suddenly flashing in her eyes; "I should despise and hate you, were you calmly and resignedly to endure the wrongs which you may have suffered at the hands of a man. Love is the religion of the heart, Caroline," she continued, in an impressive tone; "it will either elevate those who cherish it, to the condition of saints, or it will hurl them, like fallen angels, into that abyss where rage the flames of vengeance and remorse. We are the fallen angels, Caroline, and like fiends should we war against those who have plunged us into the hell of our outraged feelings, our blighted affections, and our ruined hopes."

The transition of the lady's manner from the most amiable softness and winning gentleness to violence and bitterness was so rapid, and accompanied by such a change in the entire expression of her countenance, that Caroline for a moment shrank back in dismay and averted her looks; but the next instant a species of horrible fascination which she could not resist made her glance toward the invalid again, and then her eyes were riveted, spellbound, upon the features which were so touching in the repose of the soul, and so terrible in the bosom's storm and tempest.

"Caroline, my friend," continued the lady, in a voice of such keen bitterness and withering acrimony that it seemed as if a demoness spoke within her, "my heart is at times the prey to fiends who infuse into my veins a horrible madness. Oh, for the rage, the fury, the havoc of conflict, look not into history's pages in search of sanguinary fights, seek not descriptions of bloody battles and the murderous storming of cities and sack of towns; but down, deep into the human heart must your eyes plunge, and there, in the profundities of that mortal pandemonium, will you behold a more tremendous spectacle of strife and war and horror and devastation. Such, at least, is my heart at times, when I ponder on all my wrongs; such is it at this moment."

And although the lady sank back, through sheer exhaustion, on her pillow, yet the terrible workings of her countenance, the fire flashing from her eyes, the quivering of her lips, the convulsive heavings of her bosom, and the spasmodic tremor that perceptibly agitated her very limbs beneath the bedclothes, bore appalling evidence to the truth of the words which had last fallen from her tongue. Yes, such indeed, as she had described it, was the state of her heart at that moment; and, in spite of all the vindictive fire which Caroline's Spanish blood circulated through her veins, yet was she horrified and amazed at the spectacle which that patrician now presented to her view.

But the paroxysm of fiendlike fury and demoniac wildness which had thus convulsed the lady gradually subsided, until she at length regained her former calmness of manner and sweet placidity of countenance.

"I have alarmed and horrified you, Caroline," she observed, in the most melting cadence of her musical voice; "but you will forgive me, for I am a terrible creature when my passions are aroused. I know no middle state of temperament. Tranquil as the lake when not a breeze ruffles its bosom, or furious as the roaring, raging ocean, when lashed into black and mountainous billows: that is my character. I can love with a devotion so complete that the rack or the scaffold would only raise smiles to my lips, were the penalty to be endured in order to save from injury a single hair of the adored one's head; but I can, on the other hand, hate with so refined an intensity that I would sell my soul to Satan in order to ensure the gratification of my vengeance."

"You teach me a lesson, lady, which I ought to have learned of my own accord," said Caroline, catching, as if by mesmeric influence, the spirit which animated the extraordinary young creature whose lips could tutor themselves to give utterance to such strong epithets and such terse and vigorous language. "I also have dreamed of vengeance, lady; I also have terrible wrongs to goad me on to the fury of a remorseless fiend. But I never thought of a vengeance so deadly, so unrelenting, so complete, as that which you appear to cherish. Oh, I rejoice that I have thus been thrown in your way; for, at a humble distance, my nature resembles your own. Too meek, too humble, too enduring, and too fond, on the one hand, all that I need on the other is a glorious example to set the energies of my soul — my Spanish soul — into an appalling conflagration."

"Let your meekness turn to pride, as the rivulet that flows on in smiles hardens into stern and impenetrable ice," exclaimed the patrician, the brilliant fire again lighting up in her eyes, and the hectic flush of excitement mantling on her damask cheeks. "It were folly, madness, grovelling absurdity, to allow the tender reminiscences of the past to paralyze you for the present, or disarm you for the future. The more softly and sweetly gushed the current of your young heart's bright affections, the darker and blacker and stormier should roll the eddies of that ruined heart's direst hate and insatiable vengeance. Listen, Caroline," continued the lady, her tone suddenly assuming the seriousness of profound pathos: " I have loved as never woman loved before; I worshipped the very ground upon which he trod. To breathe the same air with him was a luxury ineffable; to behold his eyes beaming upon me with the rapture of passion, was a bliss indescribable. I gave him the rich gift of a heart that had never loved before, a heart fraught with the most fervent affections, and not palled by the pleasures and dissipation of this world. And how has he rewarded me? "

" Such was my case, and the reward which I have reaped is the same that you have experienced," said Caroline. " Oh, show me the way to be avenged, dear lady, and I will bless the hour that brought us thus together."

" My vengeance is already progressing, and it is terrible! " murmured the patrician, in a low but hoarse whisper, while a sombre shade spread itself over her features. " He suspects not that my revenge is thus slowly, mysteriously, but surely overtaking him; but, when I come to know you better, Caroline, my secret shall be revealed to you, and the same means which I am now employing may become equally effective in your hands. First, however, I must assure myself that your disposition resembles mine, and that this enthusiasm which you have now shown is the natural result of an energetic soul, and not an evanescent feeling sympathetically aroused by the words that have fallen from my lips."

" Believe me, dear lady, I shall study to deserve your confidence," answered Caroline. " But, hark! " she exclaimed, abruptly, as she placed her finger upon her lip; " footsteps ascend the stairs. It is Mrs. Lindley who is approaching."

The patrician sank back upon her pillow and instantly composed her countenance. Miss Walters reseated herself; and thus, when the midwife entered the room, nothing betrayed to her searching glance the terrible nature of the discourse which the two vindictive young women had held together.

" Caroline," said Mrs. Lindley, " you may now rejoin your companions. To-morrow you can again visit your new acquaintance, provided that your society be agreeable."

" Oh, yes," exclaimed the invalid; " she is an amiable girl, and I already love her. The more of her company that she can devote to me, the better I shall be pleased. Good evening, Caroline. Kiss me."

And as Miss Walters embraced the patrician, a rapid glance of intelligence passed between them, — a silent vow to observe the strictest and most solemn secrecy with regard to the confidence which they had already exchanged.

When Caroline had quitted the room, Mrs. Lindley, having listened until her retreating footsteps along the passage were no longer audible, approached the bed, and observed, in a mysterious whisper, "The Countess of Desborough is below, and desires to see you. She has a communication of importance to make."

"Let her come up, my good friend," returned the patrician.

"But I have something else to tell you," continued the midwife; "and I beg and implore that you will not excite yourself."

"Proceed. I am calm and shall remain so," was the cool and collected response.

"A young gentleman is with her ladyship — "

"Ah!" ejaculated the invalid, a fearful gloom overspreading her countenance.

"Now, in the name of Heaven, be tranquillized," said Mrs. Lindley, in an imploring tone. "The countess gave me the strictest injunctions not to tell you that any one was with her; but this command I could not obey, for a single glance at that young man convinced me that he — "

"Yes, yes, I understand you," hastily interrupted the lady. "But, tell me, my good friend, is he in the desperate state which has been represented to us? Has my vengeance — "

"Hush! for God's sake, hush!" said the midwife, in a hoarse whisper. "The very walls have ears. You must not appear to know that he is in the house, until the countess chooses to communicate the fact. For that he has come hither to obtain an interview with you, through your aunt's intercession, is very evident. And now, dear young lady, should his grief, his penitence, his tears move your heart, you will not reveal to him that dreadful secret which — "

"Do you consider me so weak, so insane?" demanded the patrician.

"Hush! I have a better opinion of you," returned Mrs. Lindley, who, nevertheless, trembled all over. "But pray forgive me for reminding you that a single suspicion engendered in the breast of that young man may cost both you and me our very lives!" she added, in a tone scarcely audible, but with a terrible emphasis.

"Scatter all apprehensions to the winds," answered the invalid. "You know that my resolution is indomitable, that my heart is of steel —"

"Otherwise I should never have been induced to assist you as I have done," observed the midwife. "And now compose yourself, dear lady, for in a few minutes the countess will be in your presence."

"It is for you to tranquillize yourself, my good friend," was the response, accompanied by a reassuring smile; "for your lips quiver, and you seem to be in a nervous tremor."

"Now that I am certain you will behave with prudence," added Mrs. Lindley, "I shall appear both firm and collected. But remember," she whispered, as she stooped down until her lips touched the lady's ear, "remember that the child was still-born, and that it was buried the next day in Lambeth churchyard, no funeral service being necessary."

"I understand you. And now leave me, or they will wonder at your protracted absence."

Mrs. Lindley accordingly quitted the chamber, to which the Countess of Desborough ascended almost immediately afterward.

CHAPTER XLII

THE MYSTERIES OF THE BOOKCASE — FERNANDA AND ARTHUR

The Honourable Mr. Eaton remained in the the parlour down-stairs with the midwife, while Lady Desborough undertook to prepare the way for an interview between himself and Fernanda Aylmer, for the reader has doubtless already seen that the earl's niece and the young patrician lodger in Mrs. Lindley's establishment are one and the same person.

The midwife seated herself beside the fire, caressed her great cat, and then threw a furtive glance upon Arthur Eaton; and an icy chill shot to her heart when she observed his eyes fixed upon her as if to read what was passing in her mind. But this was only imagination on her part, the effect of a guilty soul; for the young gentleman was merely indulging a listless curiosity when he thus surveyed the forbidding countenance of the old harridan to whose care Fernanda had been consigned by her noble uncle.

" The child was still-born, Mrs. Lindley — eh? " he said, at length, by way of saying something.

" Yes, sir, and no one can regret it, under all circumstances," responded the midwife.

" Did she suffer much? " was Eaton's next inquiry.

" Hush! not so loud — walls have ears! " whispered the midwife, placing her finger upon her thin lip as she gave utterance to her favourite axiom. " Yes, she suffered a great deal, sir; it was night-time when it took place, and the wind was roaring dreadfully. It drowned her screams effectually."

Mr. Eaton shuddered, he scarcely knew why; and a long silence followed.

" How was it that the earl became acquainted with your establishment?" inquired Mr. Eaton, again breaking a silence which had something awful in it; for he felt growing upon him the superstitious but irresistible idea that he was in the presence of some old witch intimately acquainted with the dread and forbidden secrets of nature.

"I never reveal matters of that kind, sir," answered Mrs. Lindley, laconically. "The large amount of patronage I receive has been obtained through the confidence which may be placed in me."

"I beg your pardon for putting an impertinent question," said the Honourable Mr. Eaton. "I ought to have known better."

"There's no offence, sir, but I am sure you will be more pleased with my prudence for not gossiping," returned Mrs. Lindley, attempting to smile, which was rather difficult, at least to do it blandly, with such a countenance as the one that she possessed.

There was another long pause; and in about ten minutes a servant entered and whispered in the old woman's ear that one of the young ladies had been taken suddenly unwell and was obliged to retire to her chamber. Mrs. Lindley apologized to Mr. Eaton for leaving him, and quitted the parlour.

The young gentleman, finding himself alone, began to think that the interview between the Countess of Desborough and Fernanda Aylmer was unnecessarily long; and a feeling of uneasiness, for which he could scarcely account, stole over him as he cast his eyes around the sombre-looking room, whose gloomy aspect was rather shadowed forth than relieved by the dimly burning candles and the flickering light of the fire.

Rising from his seat, he examined the portraits of eminent physicians suspended to the walls; and his tour around the little parlour brought him to the antique bookcase, on the shelves of which were the mouldy volumes treating of midwifery and the uses of herbs, and the huge Bible fastened with silver clasps.

This bookcase had glass doors, which the old woman was accustomed to keep carefully secured; but on the present occasion it happened that she had left the key in the lock. The fact was that she had been studying one of the books when the Countess of Desborough and Mr. Eaton arrived;

and in her haste to greet the visitors, she had forgotten her usual caution, thus merely turning the key without taking it from the lock.

Mr. Eaton, fancying that there could be no harm in examining the contents of the books, took one down from the shelf in order to while away the time until the countess should rejoin him; but as he opened the volume a piece of paper fell from between its leaves. He picked it up; and, glancing over it, was struck by the words which were written on the top.

These words were, "The Heir's Friend."

Taking it nearer to the light of the candles, Mr. Eaton had the curiosity to examine the contents of this document; and he found it to be a receipt for some purpose or another, but for what he entertained no idea. He opened the book again, in order to place it between the leaves, when his eyes fell upon another paper, also held loose in the volume and evidently put there for safety.

This second scrap of writing he examined, and found it to be another receipt, on the top of which appeared these words, "The Antidote to the Heir's Friend."

"Antidote!" he murmured to himself, while a cold shudder passed over his thin and wasted frame, as if a hyperborean wind had suddenly swept around him fresh from the icy coast of far-off Labrador; "that terrible word is ever associated, in a negative sense, with poison! This, then, must be the bane," he thought within himself, as he glanced at the first paper which he had seen; "and this is its antidote," he added, bending his eyes upon the second. "Oh, is it possible that the old hag whose very appearance froze the blood in my veins and filled me with vague and indescribable sensations of horror, is it possible that she can practise other and darker acts than those of midwifery?"

Then, obeying an irresistible feeling of curiosity, he seated himself at the table, and, by the aid of a silver pencil-case which he had about him, proceeded to copy on the back of a letter the two receipts that seemed to be invested with so sinister and mysterious an interest. All this was the work of a few minutes; and having yielded to the sudden impulse that thus prompted him to adopt the means of instituting future inquiries into the nature of the receipts, he replaced them in the volume, which he restored to the shelf.

Having closed the bookcase, he returned to his seat; but scarcely had he regained his chair when the midwife came back to the room.

As she entered, her eye caught sight of the key in the lock of the bookcase; and Arthur Eaton observed that she started as with a slight tremor. At the same instant she darted a rapid and searching glance upon him, for her avocations, both ostensible and secret, naturally made her suspicious; and knowing she had committed an oversight in leaving the key in the lock, her guilty conscience momentarily made her shudder lest her visitor should have pried into the secrets of that bookcase.

But the calmness which he had assumed sat with so natural an air upon his pale countenance, that she was instantly reassured; and, taking out the key, she returned to her seat.

The change in her manner, however, struck Mr. Eaton; and he felt more convinced than ever that something awfully mysterious was associated with the receipts which he had just found in the old volume.

Soon after the return of Mrs. Lindley to the parlour, the Countess of Desborough made her appearance. The midwife then withdrew again, in order to allow the noble lady an opportunity of conversing unrestrainedly with the Honourable Mr. Eaton.

" Fernanda will see you," said Eleanor, the moment the door had closed behind Mrs. Lindley. " But I warn you that it will prove a difficult task to persuade her to accept the reparation which you have proposed to make her. My interview with her has lasted an hour," added the countess, referring to her watch; " and you may therefore judge that much argument has already been used, and many objections encountered on my side."

" Am I to see her alone? " asked Mr. Eaton, in a subdued and tremulous tone, for he dreaded the meeting, although he himself had courted it in the first instance.

" Yes, alone," returned the countess. " Follow me; I will conduct you to the door of Fernanda's chamber."

They accordingly ascended the stairs, and in less than a minute Arthur Eaton found himself in the presence of the wronged Fernanda.

She was seated up in the bed, supported by pillows, and with a large shawl thrown loosely over her shoulders.

An unnatural fire shone in her eyes, and the scarlet of her lips was perfectly brilliant, these indications of strong inward emotions contrasting strangely with the pallor of her countenance. One white hand lay beneath her head, the fingers clutching the dark brown tresses, as if by that action she held back the feelings which struggled in her bosom for a vent; while the other hand, cast upon the outside of a coverlid, trembled nervously, or, rather convulsively. The undulated swelling and sinking of the throat and the rapid heaving of the bosom were additional signs of the tempest that was warring in her heart.

Eaton, who knew her well, saw that she was far from tranquil, but that she was labouring to assume a composure the efforts to force which did her harm. Enfeebled and attenuated as he was, the spectacle made him tremble throughout his entire being; and uninvited he sank upon a chair placed near the couch.

" At length we meet again, Fernanda," he murmured, in a suffocating voice.

" Yes, at length we meet again," in a low and even hoarse tone, so different from those melodious accents which had once filled his ears with delight and infused joy and happiness into his very soul. " But how and where do we meet, Arthur? " she demanded, fixing her eyes upon him. " Oh, cast your looks around this room and tell me whether it be such a one as that to which I have been accustomed! Think of the situation of this house, in an obscure street belonging to a vile neighbourhood, a street and a district unknown to me until I came hither. Think, too, of the nature of this house, an asylum for the victims of man's deceit or of their own depravity. And have you seen the woman who keeps this house? Is she not a fitting genius to preside over so abominable a den? Who, then, is the cause of my consignment to such a place and to the care of such a hag? "

Eaton could not reply; he was alarmed by the gathering vehemence with which she spoke, and by the increasing brilliancy of those eyes which appeared to shed flames upon him.

" What! you cannot answer me? " resumed Fernanda, bitterly. " Oh, wherefore have you come hither? Is it to gloat over me in my misfortune? Is it to feast your eyes upon my unhappiness? Is it to avenge yourself for any harsh word that may ever have escaped my lips in those days when you taught me to believe that you loved me? Is it for any whim or caprice of which I might have thoughtlessly made you the victim, but for which I was always wont to demand your pardon with tears streaming down my cheeks? If these be the objects for which you have sought me in my wretched retreat, they are fully gained; for it is indeed the once lovely, courted, and brilliant Fernanda Aylmer whom you find beneath this detestable roof."

"My God! you will drive me mad!" exclaimed Eaton. "Have you no compassion upon me, no mercy?" he demanded, his soul cruelly rent by her unjust observations, which were nevertheless so keen and cutting. "Look at me, Fernanda, gaze intently upon me, see to what I am reduced! An unknown and terrible malady has seized upon me. I am dying by inches. I have not a year's, no, nor six months' life in me, and I am come to offer you the only reparation which it is in my power to propose. But surely the Countess of Desborough has already explained this much to you?"

"She has told me that you would now become my husband, and she has urged me to accept the offer," answered Fernanda, who did not require to be told to contemplate the wreck to which the young man was reduced; for from the first moment that he entered the room she had secretly gloated over that human ruin. "The Countess of Desborough," continued Fernanda, "used every possible argument which her generous nature could suggest or her brilliant intellect devise, in order to induce me to accept this proposal which you have made so tardily — so very tardily. I was inexorable; but she implored me to see you. At first I refused, until it struck me that I should like to gaze upon your altered appearance and assure myself that the information I had received concerning you was correct."

"Then is it possible that you rejoice in this frightful malady which has seized upon me and which baffles the art of the first physicians of the day?" exclaimed Eaton, horror and dismay depicted upon his countenance.

"Would you learn the truth?" asked Fernanda, bending upon him a look so full of fiendlike hatred that it enhanced ten thousandfold the exquisite tortures which his mind was already enduring.

"No, no!" he ejaculated, starting wildly from his seat. "I will hurry away from your presence; I never ought to have ventured hither! You loathe, hate, and abhor me; and I am frightened by your looks, horrified by your manner! Farewell, Fernanda, farewell!"

And he hastened toward the door of the chamber.

"Stay!" she exclaimed, in a tone so thrilling and penetrating that it seemed to pierce through his ears and his brain down into his very heart.

He stopped short, as if transfixed; then, staggering back, he sank into the seat which he had just quitted.

"You must not leave me thus," resumed Fernanda. "I cannot permit you to depart while any doubt remains in your mind respecting my feelings. For as yet you only suspect that I loathe, hate, and abhor you," she continued, dwelling with demoniac bitterness upon the words; "whereas it is necessary that you should be convinced. Listen to me, Arthur Eaton, and interrupt me not. My heart is a withered and blighted thing, a crushed and ruined rosebud; and yet when I contemplate its depths, I can well remember and well understand how ineffable was the aroma of love which it once exhaled. And all that love was thine, freely given and joyously accepted. In return you pledged your own affections, which surrounded me as with a halo of happiness. Then you took advantage of my tenderness, and I resigned my honour into your keeping. Perhaps I also was weak, frail, feeble; but a young woman is never the seducer of a young man. When you had possessed me you began to discover faults in my temper, you accused me of whims, and you upbraided me for caprices. But it was because you desired to play the tyrant and the despot with me, that I asserted my own independence, — the independence of a woman. When I knew that I was wrong, and reflection told me that I had behaved unjustly toward you, I besought your pardon; with tears I invoked your forgiveness. And I take God to witness the truth of my assertion, that when I seemed the most capricious I loved you the most ardently. Oh, you cannot understand all that there is noble and elevated in the mind of a woman who truly loves. At the very instant when I was vexing you with some whim, I could have torn to pieces any other human being that dared only to look insultingly upon you; at the very moment that I was piquing you with some frivolous coquetry on my part, I could have laid down my life to save you from a single pang. Was this a heart to be trampled beneath your foot? Who is perfect in this world? But no allowance is made for poor woman. You defoliated the flower of my chastity, you robbed me of my purity, and you then discovered that I was capricious. When I had become to you as a wife in the sight of Heaven, you began to find out my faults and my foibles. Just God! did not the immensity of my love in the other scale outweigh them all? But man conceives that he may trifle as he will with the best and purest affections of woman's heart, that he may lead her into frailty and sedúce her into folly, and then raise up a thousand excuses for not fulfilling the solemn pledges that elicited those concessions of her weak and confiding nature. Yes, these are the ideas which your sex entertains; and woman encourages you in your iniquity because she so seldom avenges her shame and dishonour. She weeps in secret, but rouses not herself to exertion. She pines, but does not punish. Such will not be the case with me!"

Fernanda fell back exhausted, and panting for breath; for the excitement and the vehemence with which she had spoken were terrible in the extreme.

Arthur Eaton had remained seated in utter stupefaction. He lost not a single word which fell from her lips, but those words petrified him. Statue-like, the unhappy young man listened to those dread reproaches, those dire denunciations, those concluding menaces; and it appeared to him that he was the victim of some horrible dream. But he saw how much of the upbraiding was true; and he who had endeavoured to cheat himself into the belief that all the fault lay on her side, was compelled to confess in the depths of his spirit that the preponderance was indeed on his own.

"Now, then, can you answer me?" inquired Fernanda, suddenly raising herself up in the bed again. "And do you comprehend me? do you understand why I indeed loathe, hate, and abhor you? do you know wherefore I crave for vengeance, or why I can be satisfied with that which Heaven is wreaking on you?" she demanded, suddenly struck by the fear that she had said too much, and that her meaning might perhaps become intelligible. " Oh, think not for a single instant that I could so far forget my wrongs as to accompany you to the altar; think not that I can receive as a boon that which you denied me as a right, or that I will accept as a tardy reparation the alliance which you were once proud and happy to propose. No — ten thousand times no! And if, when your last hours come, — and they cannot be far distant, — if then a thought of the injured Fernanda should rise up in your soul and wring you with remorse, oh, I shall rejoice, I shall rejoice; for I look upon you as my deadliest foe, my mortal enemy, and the air of this world will be less oppressive to me when you shall have ceased to breathe it. And now depart, leave me, Arthur Eaton — I command you!"

But she spoke to one who heard her not; the young man had fainted in his chair.

Fernanda thought that he was dead; and, terror seizing upon her, she rang the bell violently.

Mrs. Lindley, who happened to be in a neighbouring room attending upon the lodger that was unwell, hurried to Miss Aylmer's chamber, where a glance showed her for what purpose she had been summoned. Her experienced eye, however, told her in an instant that it was but a swoon into which the Honourable Arthur Eaton had fallen; and to Fernanda's rapid questions she accordingly gave reassuring answers.

Hastily loosening his neckcloth and opening his waistcoat to give him air, the old woman sprinkled water upon his countenance; but he revived not.

" In his weak and enfeebled state, this may end in death!" she murmured, in a low but impressive whisper to Miss Aylmer.

" No, no, he must not die yet!" exclaimed Fernanda, vehemently; " my vengeance is not half-complete!"

" Then naught except a few drops of the antidote will save him," returned the midwife; " and as his valet will renew the poison to-morrow — "

" Good! I comprehend you; be it so!" ejaculated Fernanda. " He must not die while I am imprisoned here and unable to mark the progress of his decline. Administer the antidote."

The vehemence with which Fernanda had spoken, and which Mrs. Lindley in vain endeavoured to check by placing her finger on her lips, had aroused Mr. Eaton somewhat; but the spiritual sense returned sooner than the physical power, and at the instant he awoke to consciousness, the word " antidote " fell upon his ear.

The effect was stupefying, and he once more became motionless as a statue. Both the midwife and Fernanda, who had observed the slight convulsive movement which indicated reviving energy, imagined that he had undergone a complete relapse; and again did the patrician lady urge the old woman to administer the antidote.

Eaton was at this moment in the full enjoyment of his reasoning faculties, though still physically powerless and inert; and that word, falling again on his ears, convinced him that it was not a delusion when he fancied that he had heard Fernanda give utterance to it a minute before.

Mrs. Lindley hurried from the room; and the dreadful though still vague suspicion which had flashed to the young man's mind nerved him with the courage and armed him with the resolution to remain perfectly still and tranquil, even now when his limbs were so far recovering their powers that he could have moved them if he had chosen. In fact, he was no longer in a swoon; but he affected to be.

" Where an antidote is administered, there poison must have previously been. In this case the antidote can do no harm; besides, it is about to be given in order to restore me."

Such were the ideas that flashed through his brain, during the few moments that Mrs. Lindley's absence lasted. When she returned she carefully closed the door behind her, and approached the armchair in which Eaton lay back with his mouth half-open and his eyes closed. In another moment he felt a small bottle applied to his lips, and a tasteless fluid trickled down his throat.

Having thus administered the antidote, Mrs. Lindley recorked the bottle, and secured it about her person.

Eaton now affected slowly to revive; and so well did he perform his part, that not even the experienced eyes of the old midwife could detect his duplicity. She handed him a glass of water, which he drank; and in a few moments his recovery seemed complete.

Rising from the chair, he turned one long, reproachful look upon Fernanda, who met the gaze with one of mingled menace and defiance; and he then quitted the room.

On rejoining the Countess of Desborough in the parlour down-stairs, he communicated to her in a few rapid words the total failure of his interview with Miss Aylmer; but he said nothing of the swoon into which he had fallen, nor the terrible language which had produced it.

The countess would have visited Fernanda's chamber again in order to try the effect of renewed prayers, arguments, and remonstrances; but Eaton assured her that her kind interference would not only prove vain and useless, at least on the present occasion, but might injuriously add to the excitement into which the scenes of the evening had thrown the young lady. Eleanor accordingly renounced the idea; and Arthur escorted her to the hackney-coach which was waiting at a little distance.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE BANE AND ANTIDOTE

When the Honourable Mr. Eaton regained his father's town mansion, which was situate in Hanover Square, he hastened to his own chamber, threw himself upon a sofa, and gave way to his reflections.

These were of a varied and conflicting nature; for there were several features in the adventures of the evening which appeared to be fraught with a strange, deep, and mysterious interest.

Wherefore should an antidote have been administered to him? Could poison possibly be circulating in his veins? and if so, how was the fact known to Mrs. Lindley and Fernanda, unless they themselves were the poisoners? Had he providentially discovered a clue to that wasting malady which baffled the skill of so many eminent physicians? If so, then the antidote was in his possession, and he could counteract the effect of the venom which was sapping the very principles of his existence.

That Fernanda was fully capable of wreaking the most deadly vengeance upon him, her language of this night had afforded incontestable proof; and that she was the authoress of his malady, if it could be attributed to human agency at all, certain words which she had uttered amply showed. Her diabolical will was manifested, her vindictive intent had been avowed; and therefore might she not be already prosecuting her scheme of revenge through the medium of some wretch whom heavy bribes had won over to her interests?

If all these conjectures were accurate, then who could this wretch be? Mr. Eaton's suspicions naturally fell upon the man most constantly about his person, his valet, William

Dudley. But this individual had been in the service of the family for several years; and his character was considered to be unimpeachable. Besides, did not William Dudley testify the most affectionate interest toward his young master? Did he not even weep at times, when Arthur spoke in his presence of the unknown malady that was carrying him silently and rapidly to the tomb? Yes, but human nature is capable of such vile hypocrisy!

These were the thoughts which now occupied the Honourable Arthur Eaton; and they bewildered him sorely. He had read of wretches living in the middle ages, and who were such adepts in compounding secret poisons that the *aqua tophana*, one of the most mysterious and deadly venoms ever invented by any votary of that detestable school, was represented to have produced upon its victims effects similar to this malady which was undermining himself. Was it possible that the appalling secret could have been revived in the present age? and was it in the keeping of that old midwife hag?

The presumption was that an affirmative might be given to these questions.

Nevertheless, was it not probable that his ears had deceived him, and that the word "antidote" had not been uttered as he was recovering from his swoon? Was it not likely that the reminiscence of the two receipts was uppermost in his mind as he returned to consciousness, and that the earliest idea which then dawned in upon him had been mistaken by his fevered fancy for a word breathed by the lips of those near him? Or, again, was it not possible that, even if that word had been spoken, it was used by an old hag ignorant of its true meaning, and applied by her to some specific medicine of her own?

Then came the conviction that it was Fernanda's lips which had breathed his word; and Eaton felt the assurance growing stronger and stronger in his mind that accident had placed him in the way to unravel mysterious and terrible things.

At all events, the copies of the receipts were in his possession; and a skilful chemist would explain to him the real nature and tendency of each.

It being now eleven o'clock, he rang the bell; and his valet almost immediately answered the summons.

Without appearing to regard him more attentively than usual, Mr. Eaton nevertheless scanned William Dudley's countenance with covert keenness; but not a lineament, not a feature, not a look betrayed anything sinister on the part of that man. Of middle age, florid complexion, light hair, good figure, and most respectable appearance, the valet seemed to be a person incapable of doing a dishonest deed, much more of perpetrating a crime of the blackest dye.

Eaton was again baffled and bewildered; but he resolved to permit his mind to come to no decisive opinion until he should have fathomed those mysteries of which he had as yet only commenced the bare initiative study.

Having laid aside his garments, Arthur retired to rest; and the valet arranged the night-table as usual by the side of the couch. A lamp, the means of procuring a speedy light, a book, a decanter of water, and a tumbler were invariably placed in this manner within his reach. He could not bear a light in the room when he felt inclined to sleep; but he chose to have the materials for procuring one, inasmuch as he frequently passed restless hours, which he endeavoured to while away by reading. He suffered much from thirst; and it was no unusual thing for him to empty the decanter of water during the night. At all events, he never failed to drink at least one tumbler.

The valet, having arranged the night-table in the manner thus described, then quitted the room.

Sleep did not immediately visit Arthur's eyes. As he lay meditating upon the singular incidents of the evening, it suddenly occurred to him that the fluid which had been poured down his throat by Mrs. Lindley, and which was denominated the antidote, was tasteless. By a natural sequence in his ideas, he reflected that such a fluid, if it were white, — for he did not catch a glimpse of the bottle that was applied to his lips, — would easily be administered in pure water. Then came the thought that if his valet actually were the wretch through whose agency poison had been given to him, the decanter nightly placed by his side was the means by which the deadly potion was conveyed into his system.

But a chemist would give him explanations on this head as well as with respect to the copies of the two receipts.

Slumber at length fell upon the eyes of the Honourable Mr. Eaton; and, awaking at an earlier hour than usual, he fancied that he felt the least thing better. The reader may be sure that he had not touched the water in the decanter during the night; but now, rising from his bed, he emptied its contents into a bottle, which he locked up in one of his drawers. First, however, he poured a few drops into the tumbler, so as to give the glass the appearance of having been used.

Returning to his couch, he rang the bell for his valet; and when that individual appeared, Eaton, who watched him narrowly without seeming to do so, observed that he cast an immediate and hasty look toward the decanter. Nevertheless, there might be nothing in this; it was, perhaps, accidental, and, moreover, Eaton's suspicions were calculated to invest very trivial occurrences with the importance of proofs of guilt. At all events, the time had not come to accuse William Dudley; and he therefore behaved toward him with his wonted urbanity and kindness.

Having risen and performed his toilet, Arthur sent a verbal apology to his father, Lord Marchmont, for absenting himself from the breakfast-table, on the plea that he was engaged to partake of that meal with a friend. The fact was, that he could restrain his curiosity no longer. He felt that he should be unable to eat another mouthful of food until he had consulted a chemist; for he had the strongest hope, amounting almost to a presentiment, that the matters he was about to investigate were of the importance of life or death to himself.

With the copy of the receipts in his pocket, and the bottle of water beneath his cloak, Arthur Eaton sallied forth from his father's noble mansion in Hanover Square; and, directing his steps toward Bond Street, he entered the shop of a celebrated chemist who supplied the family with the medicine made up according to a physician's prescription.

Mr. Bradford — for such was the chemist's name — was surprised at receiving so early a visit from the Honourable Mr. Eaton, the deplorable state of whose health was of course well known to him; and he was still more astonished when Arthur, with an air full of mystery, requested to speak to him in the strictest privacy.

Bradford, who was a tall, thin, pale-faced, elderly man, led the way to the laboratory at the back of the premises, and closed the door. Mr. Eaton requested him to lock it, a demand with which he immediately complied, marvelling more and more what could possibly be the meaning of these precautions.

" I must earnestly and imperiously stipulate, in the first instance," began Arthur, " that you will ask me no questions relative to the way in which I obtained possession of certain receipts respecting which I require an explanation."

" It is not my habit to evince an impertinent curiosity, Mr. Eaton," answered Bradford, somewhat hurt by the nature of the remark.

" I did not mean to offend you, my dear sir," exclaimed Arthur, with a warm sincerity which instantly appeased the chemist, who was a good and kind-hearted man. " But should these receipts turn out as I suspect they will, you will at once perceive that there is some profound mystery regarding the way in which they fell into my hands."

" I will treat the matter purely as one of business," replied Mr. Bradford, " and will seek to learn no more than you may think to communicate."

" Thank you for this assurance," rejoined Eaton. " Will you now have the kindness to give me your opinion relative to the two receipts which are written on the back of this letter? "

Mr. Bradford put on his spectacles, took the paper, and read it with deep attention. At length, raising his eyes, he fixed a look of mingled congratulation and surprise upon Arthur, saying, " I am much mistaken if you do not now possess the clue to the malady which has been destroying you, as well as the secret of its cure."

" The great God be praised! " exclaimed the young man, joining his hands fervently. " Oh, if this were indeed the case — But it is a happiness too great — too great! "

And he melted into tears. For all in a moment the premature winter of his life appeared suddenly to spring into vernal bloom again; the withered branches of his decaying existence seemed to clothe themselves abruptly with a renovated verdure; hope, bright and brilliant hope, shed forth its radiant beams upon his head; and he already felt as if he were treading the earth with the firm foot and the elastic step of a vigorous youthfulness, instead of creeping mournfully over its surface with the despondent manner of a caducity about to close in the sleep of death.

"Yes, it is as I have said!" cried the chemist, in a joyful tone. "The one receipt is a slow, fatal, and mysterious poison; the other is its antidote. Oh, well indeed may the former be denominated the Heir's Friend; for anything more sure, more certain to effect a deadly purpose, could not well be conceived. Never did the ingenuity of man accomplish so wonderful, but at the same time so horrible a combination as this. The uses and effects of each component part, viewed separately, are well known to the merest novice in chemical studies; but never would it strike any one to throw these ingredients together. Accident or the promptings of Satan must have been the origin of this infernal mixture."

"What colour would it be? and what taste would it have?" inquired Arthur, so overjoyed at the almost incredible good news which he had received that he could scarcely restrain his impatience to ask additional questions; for he longed to begin taking the antidote. He yearned also to assure his afflicted father that a change had manifested itself in him and that there was yet room to hope.

"The colour would be white, or, rather, there would be no colour at all," responded the chemist; "and the fluid would be utterly tasteless."

"And those remarks apply alike both to the poison and to the antidote?" exclaimed Arthur.

"Precisely so. But it must have been Providence that placed these secrets in your way, my dear Mr. Eaton," continued Bradford, pressing the young man's hand warmly, and even shedding tears, so deep was the interest now inspired within him toward one to whom Heaven's mercy or else a marvellous accident had pointed out the issue leading from the path of death to the temple of salvation.

"My dear friend, I thank you most cordially for this sympathy and kind feeling on your part," responded Arthur, down whose cheeks the tears likewise fell thick and fast. "The hand of God is in this, and never, never shall I cease to adore his holy name. If I be indeed spared, if my cure should in reality be effected — "

"It will be — it must be!" interrupted the chemist, emphatically. "The bane is in your blood, — the antidote is in your hands!"

"Then will I devote to good and virtuous and honourable purposes that existence which the Almighty has so miraculously vouchsafed to rescue from the jaws of an early grave," exclaimed Arthur Eaton, not uttering these words in the enthusiasm of a moment or in obedience to a passing impulse, but deeply and solemnly feeling their force and weighing their tendency.

"I am not superstitious," said the chemist, likewise adopting a serious tone; "but when I think of the condition in which you have been, — in which you, indeed, still are, — then, when I reflect that some means, the nature whereof I seek not to learn, have opened to your knowledge the cause of your malady, and placed in your hands the sure and certain method of its cure, I do not hesitate to say that your affliction and your redemption will have been intended for purposes having their origin and destiny in the divine wisdom."

"Such will ever be my own sentiments," exclaimed Arthur. "But now," he added, pointing to the bottle which he had placed on the table when first entering the room, "will you be so kind as to tell me whether that fluid contains anything prejudicial to him who might drink it?"

Mr. Bradford forthwith proceeded to submit the contents of the bottle to several chemical tests; and while he was thus engaged, Arthur watched him with the deepest anxiety and most intense interest. Thus upwards of half an hour elapsed; and at the expiration of that interval, the chemist said, in a solemn tone, "The water which that bottle contained was poisoned according to the receipt entitled the Heir's Friend."

"Then farewell to all confidence in the reading of the human physiognomy!" exclaimed Arthur, his thoughts instantly settling upon William Dudley. "But, no — I was wrong thus to speak," he observed, hurriedly; "there are exceptions to all rules, and I must continue to believe that the same Deity who created man in his own image made the countenance a reflex of the mind. This is the rule; the other is the exception. Mr. Bradford, I am deeply, deeply indebted to you for the trouble which you have taken, and the interest you have manifested in my behalf.

May I now request that you will prepare me the antidote which is to restore me to health and happiness? "

" It will take me two hours to compound the mixture, Mr. Eaton," was the answer. " Shall I send it to your residence? "

" No; in the afternoon I will call for it. I do not wish that a single soul beneath my father's roof should learn that I am indebted to medicine for this miraculous resuscitation which is to take place. It must be believed that Nature herself is working her own cure by means as mysterious as those which my friends imagine to be the sole cause of my malady."

Eaton then took his leave of the chemist, to whom he offered no pecuniary recompense. But he went straight to a goldsmith's in the same street; and, in the course of the day, Mr. Bradford received a complete service of very handsome silver plate, which could not possibly have cost him less than five hundred guineas.

CHAPTER XLIV

MRS. FITZHERBERT

It was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and the Prince of Wales was seated at breakfast with a lady in one of the most elegant apartments of Carlton House.

The companion to the heir apparent on this occasion was a woman of remarkable beauty. Her complexion was delicately fair, not of an insipid paleness, nor as white as marble or as snow; but of a transparent living white, such as the soft and velvet-like skin ought to be, and which no painter can imitate on his canvas. On each round cheek there appeared the tint of the rose, which could easily deepen, with excitement or animation, into a richer and a warmer glow.

Her hair was very light, not flaxen, nor yellow, nor auburn; but of that indescribable paleness which is nevertheless glossy and shining, and which, in the sun's rays or in the lustre of lamps, seems as if it were sprinkled with gold-dust. She, however, wore it powdered, and arranged in a myriad curls; and although that style, borrowed from the court of Louis XVI of France, was a disfigurement in nine cases out of ten, it appeared exquisitely becoming to the lady whom we are describing.

Her eyes were large, and of a light, clear, liquid blue, usually languishing and tender, but sometimes lighting up with an expression which commanded, or with a lustre which overawed. From a soul formed for love did those eyes borrow the sweetness that smiled from them; and more melting would they grow beneath the gaze of him to whom her heart was given.

Her nose was remarkable for its classic shape; and its beautifully finished outline imparted an air of inconceivable grace to the general contour of the countenance. Her mouth was full and ripe, but not coarse; and her teeth were perfect in evenness and brilliancy.

In stature she was not above the middle height; and although her charms had expanded into the luxuriance of maturity, yet her figure had not lost its symmetry. The sweeping outlines of her robust arms, bare to the shoulders, the fulness but plump roundness of the bosom which a low dress more than half-revealed, the swanlike curvature of the proud neck, and the wavy development of the entire form, — all these constituted an assemblage of charms most suited to the taste of the libidinous prince, and in which he rejoiced to revel.

This lady was Mrs. Fitzherbert.

She was now in her thirty-ninth year, but in all the glory of her charms, in all the splendour of her beauty. She had been twice married before she became acquainted with the heir apparent; but she was without issue from either of those alliances. In religious faith she was a Roman Catholic, and was slightly tinged with bigotry; nevertheless, she was addicted to pleasure, fond of society, and not particularly scrupulous in her morals — as her amour with the Marquis of Bellois fully testified.

At the time of which we are writing, Mrs. Fitzherbert dwelt openly with the Prince of Wales. She had her suite of apartments in Carlton House, where she received her own friends and gave elegant entertainments; and she likewise presided at the balls and soirées given by the heir apparent himself. In every respect was she treated and looked upon as his wife, save in name; for it was always as Mrs. Fitzherbert that she was spoken of by his Royal Highness or addressed by others.

But to return to our narrative.

It was, as we have already said, about eleven o'clock in the forenoon; and the Prince of Wales was breakfasting with Mrs. Fitzherbert in one of her own rooms at Carlton House.

They had dismissed the attendants, in order to converse without restraint; for it was evident by their manner that something had occurred to give them annoyance.

"And when did you hear of his Majesty's intention?" inquired the lady, after a long pause; and her voice, naturally

"THE PRINCE OF WALES WAS BREAKFASTING WITH MRS. FITZHERBERT"

Photogravure from original by Merrill

soft and pleasing, was rendered perfectly melodious by the melancholy plaintiveness which now characterized it.

"Last night, my love," responded the prince. "I had been to call on the Earl and Countess of Desborough, who have returned to town; and as I was returning home in my carriage I met a friend who was on horseback. He beckoned the coachman to stop, as he had something of importance to communicate; and he assured me, in a hurried whisper at the carriage window, that the thing was the talk of the clubs. It appears that Ministers received yesterday morning a message from my august father, intimating his desire that such an alliance should take place. A Cabinet Council was held in the afternoon; and a few hours later the matter was known throughout the West End."

"And who was this friend that seems to have been the first to communicate so important a project to the personage principally concerned and interested in it?" asked Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Oh, you know him well enough, my dear," replied the prince. "It was that kind-hearted, useful — "

"And good-for-nothing fellow, Tim Meagles," added the lady, finishing the sentence of the prince for him, her brows contracting with displeasure at the same time. "I am sorry, George, that you are so fond of that individual's society."

"By God!" exclaimed the prince, somewhat angrily. "I should not know very well how to do without him. And you must admit, my love," he added, in a milder tone, "that Mr. Meagles has always conducted himself with the utmost respect toward you. Indeed, I fancied that you were better pleased with him lately than you used to be; and upon the strength of that opinion I was foolish enough to tell him to call upon me in your apartments this morning. He received my instructions to glean all he could concerning this intended marriage — "

"Marriage!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert, her countenance suddenly becoming flushed with indignation. "Surely, George, you do not dream that the project can ever be realized, that the design so secretly planned by your royal father can ever arrive at such an issue?"

"I am at your mercy, my dearest creature," answered the prince.

"At my mercy!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, now starting from her seat. "What! do you even for a single instant harbour the thought — "

"Silence, I implore you!" cried the heir apparent, also rising from his chair. "We know not how easily we may be overheard. Be assured that I will do nothing without previously consulting you, that I will make as many sacrifices as I dare, short of my right to the crown — "

"And even that have you sworn to renounce sooner than act a perfidious part toward me!" interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone of deep solemnity.

The prince was about to reply, when the door opened, and Tim Meagles entered the room.

He instantly saw that there was something wrong, but he was too good a tactician to appear to notice it; and, with a low obeisance to Mrs. Fitzherbert, he took the hand which the Prince of Wales held out to him.

The lady returned his salutation with cold courtesy, and resumed her seat. The prince threw himself upon a sofa, and invited Meagles to take a chair, inquiring at the same time whether he had breakfasted.

"Yes, hours ago," was the answer; "and since then I have been gathering all the intelligence I could scrape together respecting — "

He stopped, and glanced toward the lady.

"You may continue, sir," said Mrs. Fitzherbert. "His Royal Highness has no secrets with me," she added, in a dignified manner.

"It is all true, just as I told you," proceeded Meagles, addressing himself to the prince. "The king has communicated to the Ministers his desire that your Royal Highness should espouse the Princess Caroline of Brunswick. The Cabinet assembled yesterday afternoon and discussed the question; and it was agreed to retain the affair a secret for a short time longer. But somehow or another the rumour got afloat in the evening, and now it is known to be correct."

"Upon my honour," exclaimed the prince, indignantly, "my august father has a magnificent notion of the way to cater for his son's happiness; and Mr. Pitt and his friends in the Cabinet dispose of the destinies of the heir apparent to the throne with as much coolness as a magistrate displays when he commits a vagrant to the House of Correction."

" It will be your fault if you submit tamely to these indignities," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, emphatically. " The contemplated alliance becomes the talk of the town even before the faintest hint has been dropped to yourself."

" It is too bad," returned the prince. " But what more have you heard, Meagles? Tell us everything, and without reserve. Mrs. Fitzherbert will be all the better pleased with you."

" There is a report that your Royal Highness's private affairs were also discussed yesterday at the Cabinet Council," said Tim; " and I know that the rumour is correct."

" What was mooted? And how are you aware that the story is true? " demanded the prince, with feverish impatience, and with a hasty glance at Mrs. Fitzherbert.

" In the first place," answered Meagles, " it is said that Mr. Pitt proposed to his colleagues a scheme for the settlement of the debts contracted by your Royal Highness, and which project will be submitted to Parliament when it meets next month. Secondly, I am sure that such was the case, because the editor of the government evening paper is an intimate friend of mine; and I have been with him this morning. There'll appear an article, in the shape of what may be termed a ' feeler,' in to-night's edition."

" Even the very scrubs of the press receive such important intelligence earlier than I," exclaimed the prince, in a tone which proved how deeply he was mortified. " It is the most underhand thing I ever knew in all my life."

" I can assure you that my friend Percy Booth, the editor, is no scrub," said Meagles, somewhat annoyed at the supercilious manner in which his Royal Highness spoke of the gentlemen of the press collectively, and consequently of him individually. " He is a fine fellow, will do a good action, sings a capital song, and is a famous hand with the gloves."

" No insult was intended to your friend, sir," observed Mrs. Fitzherbert, whose sensitiveness was shocked at the idea of a man's amiable qualities being summed up in the singing of bacchanalian airs and in pugilistic skilfulness.

"So much the better, madam," said Meagles, who saw that Mrs. Fitzherbert could barely tolerate his presence; and, by way of retaliation, he remarked, "By the bye, your Royal Highness will be delighted with a certain French nobleman who longs to be presented to you. He is a refugee — "

"Ah! indeed," exclaimed the heir apparent, fancying that Meagles was adopting this indirect mode of letting him know that he had discovered another rich emigrant, who, like the Marquis of St. Croix, would be glad to entrust his money to the princely keeping. "I shall be pleased to show suitable attention to any French nobleman who has suffered through devotion to his sovereign. What is the name of your new foreign acquaintance?"

"The Marquis of Bellois," responded Meagles; and he threw a furtive glance toward Mrs. Fitzherbert to notice the effect which the mention of this name would have upon her.

She turned ashy pale, and for an instant appeared to reel upon her chair, as if seized with a sudden vertigo; but recovering herself the next moment, she darted a rapid look at Meagles, to ascertain whether he had any sinister meaning in thus introducing the name of that nobleman.

Their eyes met, and were instantaneously averted; and while the lady affected to be arranging her brooch, Meagles glanced toward the prince. His Royal Highness had not observed the momentary confusion on the part of Mrs. Fitzherbert, nor the rapid looks that followed it; for he had fallen into a profound reverie, the matrimonial project devised by his father having sorely troubled him.

"Yes," continued Meagles, who was determined to convince Mrs. Fitzherbert that she must not hope to domineer over him or treat him with contempt in future, "this Marquis of Bellois is a very nice man, and must have been uncommonly handsome a few years ago. But I am afraid he is rather dissipated — indeed, that he is given to gambling. If so, he will find plenty of English sharks ready to prey upon him."

"We were discussing more important matters, I think, Mr. Meagles," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, who had now recovered her self-possession; for a few moments' reflection had led her to believe, or rather, to flatter herself, that the Marquis of Bellois was too high-minded and generous a man to have betrayed her secret to Mr. Timothy Meagles.

" We will return to the former topic, madam, since such in your pleasure," observed this individual. " But, by the bye, the marquis informed me that he had the honour of becoming acquainted with you, during your residence at Plombières, and afterward in Paris, several years ago."

An ice-bolt seemed to shoot through the heart of Mrs. Fitzherbert, as Tim Meagles uttered these words in a measured tone, and with his gaze fixed intently upon her countenance. She felt that she was once more turning deadly pale, that her lips quivered, that the perspiration burst forth upon her brow; for it was now impossible to close her eyes to the fact that the Marquis de Bellois had betrayed her, and that Mr. Meagles was the depository of the terrible secret of her amour with that nobleman.

Starting in her chair, as if awakening from a hideous dream, she threw an affrighted glance toward the prince; but he was still buried in thought, and had not observed her changing countenance nor her agitated manner. Considerably relieved, Mrs. Fitzherbert rose from her seat; and approaching Meagles, who stood up as she thus advanced toward him, she said, " For your devotion to the prince I sincerely thank you. For the good offices which you have occasionally performed for me, at the request of his Royal Highness, I also tender you my gratitude. I did not know your good disposition thoroughly until this morning; but his Royal Highness has quite effaced any disagreeable impressions which misrepresentations may have made upon my mind, and henceforth we will be friends, Mr. Meagles."

Having uttered these words in her blandest tones, assuming at the same time her most enchanting smiles, the lady extended her hand with an apparent frankness, which did not, however, for a single moment deceive the individual to whom it was proffered.

Nevertheless, he had no inclination to continue, at least for the present, the little warfare which he had so successfully commenced. The triumph was his own. He had humbled the haughty beauty; nay, more, he had convinced her that she was in his power, and he was satisfied. For he was very far from being naturally spiteful; but he could not endure to be treated with contumely or indifference.

Accepting, therefore, the fair hand that was tendered with such seeming grace, he said, significantly, "It will be your own fault, madam, if I ever become your enemy;" and thus terminated this little incident which had at one time overwhelmed Mrs. Fitzherbert with the most crushing fears.

The prince, who had not observed anything of all this, was now awakened from his deep reverie by some remark which the lady addressed to him; and the discourse again turned on the matrimonial project that had been set afloat at the court and in the Cabinet.

CHAPTER XLV

THE BALL

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed from the date of the incidents just recorded; and at eight o'clock, on a damp and inclement evening, carriages began to arrive, one after another in rapid succession, at the mansion of Lord Marchmont in Hanover Square. From the windows of the spacious dwelling, in spite of the rich curtains drawn within, poured floods of mellowed light; and soon the sounds of music came floating forth upon the air.

Lord Marchmont gave a grand ball that evening. So evident an improvement had taken place in the health of his only son and heir, the Honourable Mr. Eaton, that the old nobleman's heart had become accessible to joy once more; and his elegant saloons were accordingly thrown open to the *élite* of the fashion and aristocracy at the West End.

Though the weather was so ungenial without, and the poor shivering beggar was forced to wrap his rags more closely around him, yet within the vast and lofty rooms of that splendid mansion all was brilliant and delightful. The air was warm and perfumed; the lustre of innumerable lamps and magnificent chandeliers was reflected in the immense mirrors, which also multiplied the elegant and beauteous forms that were now assembling; stars shone on the breasts of nobles, and diamonds sparkled on the brows of charming ladies. The atmosphere was harmonious with the music of many instruments and the melody of many soft voices, and every countenance appeared radiant with happiness.

Lord Marchmont was an old man, with features naturally stern and haughty in expression, but which could relax into smiles on such occasions as the present. His cheeks were furrowed with wrinkles, and his form was bowed with the weight of years, yet was there in his step, his air, and his conversation, all that indomitable pride which seems so inveterate a characteristic of the English aristocracy, — a pride which buoys them up with the insensate hope that even as their ancestors have worn coronets and rolled in riches for centuries past, so will their descendants be enabled to perpetuate that same hereditary usurpation of honours and of gold for centuries to come.

The Honourable Mr. Eaton was certainly much improved in appearance. Though still very pale, thin, and feeble, he was nevertheless in far better spirits than he had been for months before; and the feverish lustre of his eyes had partially subsided into a more natural and healthy appearance. His step was more elastic, his tread more assured; and he could smile, yes, with an unfeigned gaiety, upon those with whom he stopped to converse for a few minutes as he passed through the rooms, arm in arm with his father, to welcome the numerous guests.

" I do not see Mr. Clarendon," said Arthur to Lord Marchmont, as they entered the principal saloon, having traversed all those which led to it, and which were thronged with the gay and brilliant assemblage. " Are you sure that our card of invitation was delivered at the right address? — for you know, dear father, that he has removed to Cavendish Square."

" I am not only certain that the card reached him," replied Lord Marchmont, " but also that he will be here with his daughters. For, observing during the last few days that you expressed so much anxiety to see them all here this evening, I called at their house in Cavendish Square yesterday afternoon — "

" And they promised to honour us with their presence? " exclaimed Arthur, with eagerness.

" Yes. But wherefore, my dear boy, are you so desirous to see them? " asked Lord Marchmont, in a low tone. " Now that so signal a change has taken place in your health, and that I may felicitate myself upon the certainty of my coronet passing to you, I rather repent having taken Mr. Clarendon by the hand."

" My dear father," said the young man, stopping short and gazing intently upon the old peer's countenance, "you know not what pain you give me when you speak thus. It is precisely because Mr. Clarendon and his daughters had for years — indeed, until within the last three or four weeks — been treated with such cruel neglect and cold indifference on our part, that I am determined to make all the atonement that lies in my power. Therefore shall I show them the most marked attention; and if you really value my health and happiness, dear father," he added, in a lower but more impressive tone, "you will aid me in thus convincing them that they are truly welcome here, not as mere guests, but as members of the family."

"You know, my dear boy, that I will do anything to bring back the smiles to your countenance," said the old peer. "It was to give you pleasure that I called on the Clarendons yesterday to insist upon their coming to-night. They had already intended to accept our invitation, and had written the usual answer, which must, however, have miscarried. But there they are: let us hasten to welcome them."

As Lord Marchmont spoke, Mr. Clarendon entered the saloon, Octavia leaning on his right arm and Pauline on his left. Never had those two young ladies appeared to greater advantage; there was something alike noble and ravishing in their splendid style of beauty. Dressed with taste and elegance, and carrying themselves with a modest dignity and an indescribable grace, they seemed to have been born and nurtured in that sphere of fashion which they were indeed now entering for the first time.

The eyes of all present in that spacious apartment were fixed upon these charming girls as they made their appearance. The ladies could not help paying them the tacit compliment of admiration; and the nobles and gentlemen murmured to each other the praises which sprang to their lips as their looks became riveted on Mr. Clarendon's daughters.

In a few moments they were accosted by Lord Marchmont and the Honourable Mr. Eaton. The latter was duly presented by his father to the young ladies, who had expected to receive a cold, haughty, and reserved courtesy from him, and who were therefore highly delighted and most agreeably disappointed by the welcome which he gave them.

Shaking them cordially by the hand, he said, "My dear cousins, you must think me very unkind not to have called upon you. You may even imagine that I was not eager to make your acquaintance. But you would do me a serious injustice were you to entertain such an impression. The truth is, I am only beginning to recover from a long and severe malady, as your excellent father has doubtless informed you; and I have been compelled to remain at home during the last fortnight in consequence of the inclement weather. Then, again, I knew that you were occupied in removing to your new residence; and I am well aware that ladies do not like to be disturbed when thus engaged. Now, however, that my health is greatly improving and that you are doubtless settled by this time in Cavendish Square, I promise myself the pleasure of visiting you frequently. Come, we will leave your father to converse with mine, while I conduct you to seats."

And having thus addressed Octavia and Pauline in the most affable manner, and with the familiarity of a relation instead of the reserved politeness of a mere friend, — much less with the cold reserve of a stranger, — he gave each an arm and led them slowly through the suite of drawing-rooms.

"Now that I hope I have made my peace with you, charming cousins, for not calling upon you," resumed Eaton, who in reality had abstained from visiting them hitherto in order that he might afford them a more decided proof of his good feeling by paying them a marked attention in the presence of the fashion and rank assembled on the present occasion, "and now that I have unburdened myself of all adequate apologies on that point," he continued, gaily, "I must give you due notice that I am likely to become a very troublesome visitor at your house. For I shall observe no cold ceremony: such formality is ridiculous between relatives. Therefore I shall intrude myself on you when the humour takes me, and while you are busied with your drawing or your embroidery, I shall read to you. Or else you shall treat me to some music now and then, for I am sure you are proficients in that art. Now, tell me, shall I be welcome on such terms?"

"We shall always be delighted to see you, Mr. Eaton," answered Octavia, who, as well as her sister, was as much charmed as amazed by the warm friendship and unaffected cordiality which their relative demonstrated toward them.

" Nay, if you call me Mr. Eaton," he instantly observed, " I shall think that you mean to treat me as any other visitor. We are cousins, and I have already declared that ceremony must not exist between us. Oh, you do not know how many inquiries I have made concerning you. I am well aware that your Christian names are Octavia and Pauline; and you are the elder, therefore your name is Octavia, — and yours is Pauline," he added, looking first at the sister who leaned on his right arm, and then at the one who was supported on his left. " Henceforth I shall call you Octavia and Pauline, and you will have the kindness to call me Arthur, or I shall very soon quarrel with you both, I can assure you."

" At least you will allow us to thank you, Arthur, for your generous kindness toward us," said Pauline.

" No, indeed I will not," he answered, immediately, and with a playful smile upon his countenance. " It would be as if I were affecting a sentiment which I do not in reality feel. But the dancing is about to commence, my charming cousins, and I must find you suitable partners. I dare not venture upon a quadrille at present, otherwise I would open the ball with you, Octavia. But I shall conduct you both to seats, and leave you for a few minutes; you will, however, speedily see me again."

Thus speaking, he escorted the two young ladies to a sofa; and then, mingling with the brilliant assembly thronging the room to which he had thus led them, he selected a handsome young nobleman, with whom he was intimately acquainted, as a partner for Octavia. Having introduced them to each other, he again looked around; and his eyes fell upon Lord Florimel, who was at that moment entering the room. Pauline, from the place where she sat, simultaneously recognized the young peer whose image dwelt in her bosom; and when she saw Arthur Eaton accost him, shake him familiarly by the hand, and then advance down the saloon leaning on his arm, her heart fluttered with indescribable emotions of pleasure.

But she had time to compose her countenance ere Lord Florimel stood before her; and he also, by a powerful effort, subdued the mingled joy and amazement which seized upon him when he thus found himself in the presence of the charming girl whom he had never once forgotten since that memorable night which he passed at Paradise Villa.

In the meantime Octavia had been led away by her partner to join the dance; and the reader may conceive the surprise and momentary confusion which she experienced when she beheld her sister leaning on the arm of Lord Florimel, as they took their places in the same quadrille. But almost immediately the music commenced; and, feeling convinced that Florimel was a man of honour who would not betray her secret, Octavia recovered her self-possession and yielded herself up to the pleasing excitement of the dance.

" At length we meet again, dear Pauline," said Lord Florimel, in a low tone, to his beautiful partner, when the arrangements of the quadrille allowed them leisure to converse. " I have been anxiously seeking the means of obtaining an introduction to your father; but your cousin Eaton was too unwell to leave home, and Lord Marchmont has been so solicitous on account of his son's health, that I found myself completely baffled."

" Were they aware that your lordship desired to be presented to us? " asked Pauline, casting down her eyes and blushing beneath the tender looks which her partner threw upon her.

" No, assuredly not," was his instantaneous reply. " They would naturally have imagined that I must have some hidden motive in requesting their agency to introduce me to you. But if I had been able to induce one of them to walk or ride out with me, I should have managed the matter in some way or another. However, we have met at last; I am now formally presented to you, and that is the essential. But tell me, dearest Pauline, are you pleased, on your side, that this has happened? "

" Did I appear very much annoyed when I saw your lordship approaching with Mr. Eaton just now? " said Pauline, raising her head and meeting his eyes with a smiling countenance.

" But wherefore do you call me by the cold title of lordship? " asked Florimel.

" Were we alone together, or at a greater distance from those who might now overhear us, I should call you Gabriel," answered Pauline. "I am not fickle nor capricious," she added, in a low tone; "and you will not find me to-morrow different from what I am to-night. Am I to hope that it is the same with you?" she said, again bending upon him a look which, though almost immediately averted again, was eloquent with the silent language of love.

"Did I not assure you, ere we parted on that memorable night to which for many reasons I blush to allude, and upon which I must nevertheless always restrospect with pleasure, inasmuch as it not only made me acquainted with you, but gave me in a few hours a deeper insight into your character than years of ordinary friendship could have afforded, — did I not then assure you, dearest Pauline," demanded the young nobleman, "that you had worked a great and signal change within me? Did I not declare that I had suddenly learned to love you with an affection unknown to me before?"

"Yes," murmured the maiden; "and have you not once repented of those assurances during the interval which has elapsed since they were given?"

"Not once, I solemnly assure you, Pauline," answered Lord Florimel, in a tone of profound sincerity. "Can you not believe me? Perhaps you have heard that I am wild and fickle; but is there not a period in every man's life when circumstances stamp his character with stability? and, young as I am, may not that hour have been proclaimed by the timepiece of my destiny?"

"I hope and believe so," answered Pauline; "otherwise we should not now be conversing thus familiarly."

"And thus tenderly," rejoined Florimel, as he took her hand to lead her again into the maze of the dance.

The figure of the quadrille now compelled the young nobleman and his partner to pass near the spot where Octavia stood; but he did not seem to recognize her, for inasmuch as, to all appearances, he had only that evening been introduced for the first time to Pauline, it would have seemed strange were he to acknowledge her sister as a previous acquaintance. For Arthur Eaton was seated at a short distance, watching the dancers; and Lord Marchmont and Mr. Clarendon were standing on the threshold of the room, conversing together, and likewise regarding the progress of the quadrille.

But when the dance was over, and Florimel had conducted Pauline to a seat, Octavia was escorted back by her own partner to her sister's side; and then the young nobleman requested the honour of Octavia's hand for the next quadrille. Both the young ladies appreciated all the delicacy and good taste which thus characterized Florimel's conduct; and while the elder darted upon him a look of grateful acknowledgment, the younger felt that she loved him more, if possible, than ever.

During the time that Florimel and Octavia now danced together, not a word fell from his lips respecting the past. He never once alluded to the incidents of that morning when he conducted her home to Paradise Villa; but he told her, in a cordial manner, " that he intended to become a frequent visitor in Cavendish Square, having already received the permission of Miss Pauline to that effect." To this remark Octavia replied by an emphatic assurance that he would always be welcome; and thus was it that the young nobleman, by his considerate behaviour, not only convinced the young lady that her secret was deemed by him to be inviolable, but that his sentiments toward her sister were of the most honourable character.

In fact, throughout the entire evening, he paid a marked attention to Pauline. When the sisters were not engaged in the dance, he remained in conversation with them; and it was a pleasing spectacle to behold that group, consisting of two of the most charming creatures on whom nature ever lavished her choicest gifts, and that young man so faultless in the femininely handsome cast of his features and the delicate symmetry of his form.

When the supper-rooms were thrown open, the Honourable Mr. Eaton escorted Octavia and Florimel gave his arm to Pauline to the luxuriously spread table; and when the hour of separation at length arrived, the sisters returned home delighted with the attentions which they had received on the occasion of their first appearance in the fashionable world.

CHAPTER XLVI

JULIA — MR. GRUMLEY

It was about six o'clock in the evening of the day following the ball at Lord Marchmont's residence that Mrs. Page, dressed in very mean attire, entered Thacker's Court, which was the name of that place where the house that she used to live in was situated. But instead of stopping at her own late abode, which was now empty and silent, she knocked at the door of the adjoining premises; and her summons was immediately answered by the man Briggs.

" Ah! Julia, my dear," he exclaimed, the moment that the light which he held in his hand flashed upon her countenance, " how d'ye do? I am quite delighted to see you. Walk in."

The young woman instantly accepted the invitation, and followed Briggs into his parlour, where she sat down. He insisted upon her laying aside her cloak and bonnet; and when he observed that she was so poorly dressed, he exclaimed, " Why, the world doesn't seem to jog well with you, Julia. Take a drop of something to console you, and tell me what you've been doing with yourself since I saw you last."

Suiting the action to the word, Briggs filled a glass with gin, which he handed to Mrs. Page; and when she had imbibed the dram, he indulged himself in one, drinking to her " better luck."

" Let me see," he continued, taking a seat, and scratching the enormous wen upon his hideous head, " when was it that I saw you last? Oh, about a fortnight ago, when you came to bury your poor father. You told me then that you had hopes of obtaining a situation, and you seemed in very good spirits. What's happened since? "

" Oh, disappointment — nothing but disappointment," answered Julia, assuming a tone and air of deep vexation; for as Briggs entertained not the slightest idea relative to her marriage, nor even suspected that she was acquainted with Page, she had her own reasons for not enlightening him upon that head. " I have failed in all my endeavours to do anything honest to obtain a livelihood," she added; " and that's the reason I am here now."

" Why, what do you suppose I can do for you, Julia? " demanded the man.

" Well, I don't know," she answered. " But I thought that perhaps you could find some means of making me useful. You've a great many acquaintances: there's the Magsman, and Carrotty Poll, and the Gallows' Widow, and the Big Beggarman, and the Kinchin-Grand — "

" Oh, yes, that's all very good! " exclaimed Briggs. " But you know I'm more of a servant to the Magsman than a master. Besides, you had an opportunity of belonging to us, if you'd liked, long ago; but you always seemed to treat us so coolly — "

" Ah! that was when my father was alive and I didn't think I should ever want your assistance," replied Julia. " But I was wrong, very wrong to act in that manner; and now I'm sorry for it. I'd do anything if you'd only forgive me. The fact is, I'm houseless and penniless," she added, bursting into tears; " and if you don't do something for me, I must go and drown myself in the river."

" Come, leave off crying, there's a dear," said Briggs, in a tone which he endeavoured to render as consolatory as possible. " We won't let you starve. But I really thought you had gone upon the town."

" I'd sooner destroy myself at once, for that's what I dread," exclaimed Julia. " No, no; I'll never do that! You suppose that because I used to go with young men when I lived next door, that I must be a thorough bad one. But if I had my fancies, I never was a prostitute, and never will be."

" Well, well, I didn't mean to annoy you, Julia. You know that we're none of us very particular — I mean them that frequents this house; and so I spoke accordingly. But tell me, Julia, did your father leave you without a pennypiece? " demanded the man.

" Without more than was enough to bury him in the wretched way that you saw," answered the young woman.

" And all his papers? " continued Briggs, interrogatively.

" I found none, although I looked everywhere," was the reply.

" Nor yet any of those pretty shiners, you know? "

" Not a single one."

" Well, that's a pity! " exclaimed the man. " I really thought the old fellow must have had a store of them somewhere or another."

" I dug up the cellar, hunted everywhere, up chimneys, in dark corners, and even in the roof," responded Julia; " but I could find nothing."

" It's a bore about the papers being lost," said Briggs; " because, according to all accounts, some of them must have been of value."

" Ah! I wish I had them," exclaimed the young woman. " I should not perhaps be as unhappy as I am now. But can you do anything for me? Is there no way in which I can possibly assist you in any of your plans? I would serve you faithfully — "

" Well, the truth is that we can always make use of a person like you," interrupted Briggs. " But, don't you see, we're obliged to be so very particular and cautious."

" Quite right," returned Julia. " At the same time, you are well aware that I am tolerably trustworthy, for a good many of your secrets are already known to me, — all your transactions with my late father, especially the business with the Aylesbury bankers; and yet I never split upon you — I'd cut my head off sooner."

" Well, I think you would, Julia," observed Briggs, approvingly. " Come, I'll undertake to admit you into our body; and I dare say the Magsman won't be angry with me for doing it of my own accord. So make yourself comfortable. He'll be here to-night at twelve punctually; and so will the Gallows' Widow and the Big Beggarman. They've got a little business to settle with those very Aylesbury bankers you was a-talking of."

" What! Mr. Martin and Mr. Ramsey? " exclaimed Julia.

" Just so. To tell you the truth, Mr. Ramsey is in this house at present — up-stairs at this very moment," answered Briggs, in a confidential tone. "He has been here this fortnight, and is only just recovered from a very severe illness. In fact, he was half-drowned, and the Magsman brought him here in a hackney-coach one night from the Mariners' Arms, — that public-house, you know, down by Execution Dock."

"I know it well enough," returned Julia. "Poor gentleman! was it an accident, then?"

"Why, not exactly," answered Briggs, with a coarse chuckle. "The fact is, he and the Big Beggarman and some others were in a boat together, and, as he had a bag of gold with him, the Beggarman gave him a shove overboard. But he was picked up by another party, and taken to the Mariners' Arms. There the Magsman went, disguised as a gentleman, — a slap-up Bond Street swell, — and got him away. Since then Ramsey has forgiven the Beggarman for the little accident," added Briggs, with a significant look; "for the fact is, the Aylesbury bankers can't very well do without our assistance at this moment."

"Then Mr. Ramsey has quite recovered?" said Julia.

"Oh, quite. But he considers it safe to remain here for a day or two longer, — particularly as Mr. Martin is in town and can come and consult with him when it's necessary," continued Briggs. "Martin will be here to-night at twelve; and we shall have a regular council of war."

At this moment there was an impatient knock at the street door; and Briggs, bidding Julia not to disturb herself, hastened to answer the summons.

"Ah! Mr. Martin, is that you?" said the man, surprised at the appearance of the banker several hours before the appointed time. "Has anything happened? But walk in."

And Briggs led the way into the parlour where Julia was seated.

Mr. Martin drew back on perceiving a strange woman; but Briggs hastened to observe, "It's all right, sir. She's one of our party, and you may speak before her."

The Aylesbury banker, who was a man well stricken in years and of a most respectable exterior, threw himself upon a chair, for he was evidently exhausted; and, laying aside his hat and cloak, he said, "Is Mr. Ramsey above?"

"He is, sir. Shall I call him down?" asked Briggs.

Martin nodded an assent; and the man immediately summoned Ramsey to the parlour.

" This young woman is the daughter of old Lightfoot, who's dead," said Briggs; " and therefore we need have no secrets from her."

" Has anything happened? " demanded Ramsey, with feverish impatience, and addressing himself to his partner. " You look care-worn, anxious, annoyed — "

" Annoyed indeed! " exclaimed Martin, in a tone of despair; then, instantly recovering his self-possession by a violent effort, he said, " Sir Richard Stamford is in London! "

" Ah! then he is about to open the campaign against us," said Ramsey, a dark cloud coming over his handsome countenance, which was pale through recent illness and much anxiety. " He must be conscious of his power, he must possess some weapons which we do not suspect, or he would not venture in the metropolis, with the reward for his apprehension hanging over his head."

" Doubtless he has received from his wife a confession of all she knew," answered Martin, solemnly.

" No, no; I would stake my existence that she would not betray me," exclaimed Ramsey. " Having survived the blow which she inflicted on herself, and with every chance of recovering — "

" You are talking at random," interrupted Martin, impatiently. " She is dead! "

" Dead! " ejaculated Ramsey. " When did she die? How have you learned this fact? "

" She died the day before yesterday, early in the morning," answered Martin; " and the fact is recorded in the journals of this date."

" Then in her last moments may she have confessed! " murmured Ramsey. " Fool that I was to entrust her with so many of our secrets! But where did you see Sir Richard Stamford? Or how do you know that he is in London? "

" Because I have seen him," responded the senior partner. " I was coming out of a coffee-house in Blackman Street, Borough, where I had just read in the newspapers an account of Lady Stamford's death, when I saw Sir Richard Stamford enter a house not far from St. George's Church. He did not perceive me, and I waited about for some time to see if he came out again; as in that case, I should have knocked at the door and asked if he lived there. But he did not reappear, and my anxiety increasing to such a pitch that it became intolerable, I hastened hither to tell you what occurred."

"Well, at all events, we have obtained a clue to his residence, or else to a house which he is in the habit of visiting," said Ramsey.

"An idea strikes me!" ejaculated Briggs. "It is of the utmost importance, for the plan which will be settled upon to-night, that we should find out whether the baronet does live at that house which you saw him enter. In any case, we must learn who and what the people are that live there: because, if we could obtain admission by fair means anyhow," he added, sinking his voice to a low and mysterious whisper, "we could do the work easy enough. What do you say?"

"Your plan is excellent," answered Ramsey. "But who can go and make the necessary inquiries? Some trustworthy and intelligent person — "

"Julia, you will undertake this mission?" interrupted Briggs, turning suddenly toward the young woman, who, though affecting to be leaning in a listless manner over the fire, had not lost a single word of the preceding conversation.

"What?" she exclaimed, raising her head and looking toward Briggs. "Did you speak to me?"

"Yes; I have something for you to do immediately." Then, putting money into her hand, he said, "You will go to the nearest stand and take a coach. Drive over into Blackman Street, and at a house which this gentleman," continued Briggs, pointing to Martin, "will describe to you, you must ascertain whether a certain Sir Richard Stamford lives there, and, if not, who does occupy the place. Endeavour to get into conversation with the servant, or the landlady, or whoever you may see — "

"I shall know how to manage it," observed Julia, in her quiet way. "Where is this house, sir, and what number is it?"

Mr. Martin described the dwelling with accuracy.

"And you will be sure to return by twelve to-night at latest," said Briggs, impressively.

"I shall not fail you," answered Julia.

She then took her departure, and hastened to Tower Hill, whence a hackney-coach conveyed her over London Bridge to the lodgings which her husband and herself occupied in Blackman Street.

On ascending to the parlour she found Sir Richard Stamford in earnest conversation with Mr. Page; but the moment that she entered, they both turned looks of anxious inquiry upon her.

" I have succeeded, fully succeeded," observed Julia, as she laid aside her bonnet and cloak. " To-night the whole gang will be in your power, — not even excepting Martin and Ramsey."

" God be thanked! " exclaimed the baronet, who was in deep mourning, and whose features were haggard and careworn. " But how have you contrived, my good Mrs. Page, to ascertain sufficient to lead you to the adoption of this belief ? "

" We have already told you not to ask us how or by what means I could insinuate myself into the councils of those villains," replied Julia. " You see, sir, that when I suggested that it would be worth while for me to make the experiment, I was not far wrong. Ramsey is staying at Briggs's house, where he has been lying ill. Martin came in while I was there — "

" I knew that he was in London," exclaimed Sir Richard. " You see, Mr. Page, that the information I received at Aylesbury was quite correct."

" Mr. Martin came to report to Mr. Ramsey the circumstance of Lady Stamford's death, which he has read in the papers of this morning," continued Julia; " and they are now afraid that she may have made certain confessions to you."

" And their fears are justified," observed Sir Richard; " for, as I have already told you, my poor penitent wife avowed everything ere she breathed her last."

" What more have you ascertained, my dear? " demanded Page of his wife.

" Mr. Martin, on coming out of the coffee-shop," she replied, " saw Sir Richard Stamford enter this very house; and would you believe it, I am actually sent over as a spy to ascertain whether he lives here, and if not, who he comes to visit. Oh, you should have seen how well I kept my countenance while receiving these instructions and a description of the exterior of the house which I knew so much better than them."

"Excellent!" cried Page, rubbing his hands. "What more?"

"The villains are to hold a grand council to-night at twelve o'clock," continued Julia. "The Magsman, the Big Beggarman, the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, Martin, and Ramsey will all be there — and your death, sir, will be resolved upon, I have no doubt, from what the miscreants let drop," she added, turning toward the baronet.

"We will see how far they can succeed in their diabolical aims," observed Sir Richard. "Mrs. Page, I thank you most sincerely for the immense service which you have rendered me; but words are nothing — deeds shall prove my gratitude. Thank God, my affairs are far from being so desperate as I at first anticipated, and I shall be a wealthy man again. But my character must be thoroughly and completely cleared."

"It will be, my dear sir, it will be," exclaimed Page. "I told you so when we were in the dungeon together, and when you had not one tithe of the proofs of innocence which you possess now. But have you anything else to tell us, Julia, my love?"

"Yes, one little incident," she answered. "I am to be back there, in Thacker's Court, by twelve o'clock, and report the results of my inquiries."

"Ah! we must see about that part of the business," said Page. "You're too useful and too precious, my dear, to put your life in jeopardy."

"I am not afraid," returned his wife, coolly; "and it may be that by going back to them again I can assist in their capture."

"This is a point on which Mr. Grumley must decide," said Page. "Let us now take a coach and be off to Bow Street. You are sure that Grumley will be there, Sir Richard?"

"When I explained in private to the magistrate this morning all the circumstances of my case, and the hope which I entertained of being enabled to place an entire gang of villains in the hands of justice," responded Sir Richard, "he ordered the head officer to remain at my disposal; and I made an appointment with the man to see him this evening."

"Ah! that's Grumley — Peter Grumley," said Page.

" He's a famous thief-taker and very fond of a drop of drink, I believe. But we will be off now. Come, Julia dear, put on another gown and throw away that wretched rag."

" Not if I'm to go back to Briggs's house," answered the young woman. " It was my miserable appearance that helped me to make out such a good tale to the fellow that he really pitied me at one time. I will keep on this gown, and resume this old bonnet and cloak, in case of need."

" Well, just as you like," said Page. " Come, we have no time to lose."

And the trio sallied forth together, Mr. Page and Sir Richard having enveloped themselves in their cloaks, and Julia taking with her the latch-key belonging to the front door. A hackney-coach conveyed them to Bow Street, where they knocked at the private door of the police office; and the summons was shortly answered by Mr. Peter Grumley himself. Sir Richard Stamford mentioned his name; and that functionary instantly conducted the party into a room where a candle was burning upon the table. A pewter pot on the mantelpiece and the pipe which the famous thief-taker held in his hand showed that he had been enjoying himself by the cheerful fire sparkling in the grate.

" Sit down," he said, as he closed the door of the dingy-looking and dirty apartment. " But I know you, my good sir," he exclaimed, fixing his eyes in a searching manner on the ex-traveller for the firm of Hodson and Morley; " your name's down in my books — and it's Page too. I recollect now. Ah! that little affair of our'n was a failur', some short time back," he added, sinking at the same moment into a huge black leathern chair studded with brass nails.

" But it sha'n't be a failure to-night, Mr. Grumley," observed Page; " and, what's more, it's some of the very same people that we mean to put into your clutches."

" Ah! what — the Magsman? " said the thief-taker, puffing his pipe in a leisurely, comfortable manner, and then burying a considerable portion of his face in the pewter pot.

" You've hit the right nail on the head, old fellow," exclaimed Mr. Page, chuckling and rubbing his hands gleefully.

" And who's this young 'oman? " asked Grumley, taking the pipe from his mouth and waving it toward Julia.

"My wife, sir, my wife, I beg to inform you," returned Page, drawing himself up in a stately manner. "But you mustn't judge of her by the costume which she now wears. I admit that it is not elegant — I will allow that it is not becoming, Mr. Grumley; but let me tell you that it is assumed for a particular purpose," he added, placing his forefinger slyly against his nose, while his sharp countenance assumed a particularly sapient expression.

"Oh, I s'pose it's a plant, then?" observed the officer, with characteristic coolness, as he slowly rolled himself around in the huge chair so as to be enabled to enjoy a good long stare at Mrs. Page.

"A what did you say?" demanded the husband, bristling up under the impression that some insulting epithet had been applied to his wife.

"Now don't be a fool, Page," said Julia. "I know what he means. Yes, Mr. Grumley, it is a plant — a regular sell; and without entering into any particulars, I must have you to know that I can insinuate myself when I choose into the company of the Magsman and his crew. I'm to be with them at midnight, or a little before: that is to say, if you think that by going amongst them I can do any good. If not, I shall of course stay away."

"Let's hear a little more about the matter, ma'am, if you please," observed the officer; then, withdrawing the pipe from his mouth and winking his right eye at Page, he added, "You ought to be proud of your good lady, sir, for she's a sharp 'un."

"Well, I am proud of her," said the ex-traveller. "She has managed this matter capitally as far as it goes. There'll be the Magsman, the Big Beggarman, the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, Ramsey, and Martin, all assembled together to-night at twelve o'clock, — a precious good haul of fish for your net, Mr. Grumley."

"And what are they going to deliberate on?" inquired the officer.

"The murder of Sir Richard Stamford," said Julia, answering the question, which was addressed to herself.

"Ah! a pleasant subject for discussion, no doubt," observed Grumley, as he coolly and quietly knocked the ashes out of his pipe and began to refill it; "but we'll see if we can't put a stopper upon them. What are you to go back for, Mrs. Page, at twelve o'clock? "

" Mr. Martin saw Sir Richard come to our house this afternoon; and I am actually employed as a spy to find out whether he lives there, and if he does not, what kind of people do. Because, as Briggs hinted, if they could bribe those people to let them quietly into the house, they would make easy work of the matter. Now you understand all about it," added Julia, " and can tell me how to proceed."

Mr. Grumley smoked his pipe for several minutes in profound silence, looking up all the time in a thoughtful manner at the ceiling, just as if its blackness could possibly throw a light on the subject of his ruminations.

" There's two ways of going to work in this here business." said the officer, at length. " One is for me and my people to make a regular assault on the premises in Thacker's Court, and take the whole gang prisoners; or else to separate them first by a straytyjim — "

" A what? " demanded Page.

" A stratagem, my good friend; don't interrupt the constable," observed Sir Richard Stamford.

" And I prefer the last method," continued Mr. Grumley, " because it will make the thing more surer. Now, ma'am," he said, turning toward Mrs. Page, " I'll tell 'ee what must be done. You'll go back a little while before twelve, and you'll pitch the rascals such a tale that some of 'em will set out to waylay the baronet this very night. You must manage to accompany the party that's chosen to do the business; and some of my men will be on the lookout at one end of the street from which Thacker's Court opens. They'll take care of the party that goes with you. Me and the rest of my people will be hidden close by the court, and when we've seen you and your companions go off, we shall know how to lay our hands on t'others that's left in the house. Now, do you understand me? "

" Perfectly," answered Julia. " I think you have decided on the best plan."

" Most assuredly," exclaimed Sir Richard. " I shall accompany you. Mr. Grumley."

" And so shall I," Mr. Page hastened to observe. " I've got my pistols about me on purpose."

" It's now ten o'clock, ma'am," said the officer, pulling out from his fob a huge silver watch which certainly was not smaller than a moderate sized turnip and could not have weighed less than a couple of pounds avoirdupois.

"I will depart at once," observed Julia; and Mr. Grumley politely escorted her to the front door of the police office.

"Now, then, Mobbs!" vociferated the officer, at the top of his stentorian voice, as he returned along the passage into the room where he had left Page and the baronet; and, in obedience to this summons, a man of most repulsive exterior made his appearance from another part of the establishment.

"Well, what is it?" growled Mobbs, as he entered the room.

Mr. Grumley gave him a few hasty instructions relative to the taking a posse of constables down into the neighbourhood of Thacker's Court, and the manner in which he was to dispose of them in two parties; and the fellow, who seemed to relish the business, grinned knowingly and withdrew, closing the door behind him.

"That's the best man I've got under me," observed Mr. Grumley, as soon as Mobbs had disappeared.

"Well, one certainly must not judge by outward looks, in that case," said Mr. Page.

"One must be a fool who does," answered the officer, laconically. "That's as desperate a chap as you'd wish to meet in a summer day's walk. He'd think no more of cutting your throat from ear to ear than eatin' his dinner."

"Then I'd much rather not meet him at all in my summer rambles," observed Page, with a cold shudder.

"Ah! but I'm obleeged to employ such fellers," continued Grumley. "You heerd talk, may be, of the man which throwed his wife out of a three pair back and cut his child's head clean off, some five or six years ago, over the water yonder?" demanded the constable, waving his pipe in the direction of Lambeth.

"To be sure I did," exclaimed Page. "But what has that to do with your friend Mobbs?"

"Why, bless ye, he's the wery man," answered Grumley. "Your health, Sir Richard — my respects to you, Mr. Page," and he buried his countenance in the pewter pot.

"You don't mean to say that you've got such a miscreant in your service, Mr. Grumley?" cried the ex-traveller, literally bounding on his seat.

" I tell ye you've just seen him," responded the officer, having finished his draught of porter. " There was two flaws in the indictment. One of 'em described the woman as being named Maria, whereas it was Mary; and t'other represented the murder to have been committed in the parish of Lambeth, whereas 'twas showed that half of the house stood in Lambeth and half in Southwark, and that it was in the Southwark half where the business took place. So the indictment was quashed, and our friend Mobbs got off. Then I took him into my service, where he's been ever since."

" But this must be a most extraordinary state of the law which allows such a wretch to escape with impunity on such miserable technicalities," observed Sir Richard Stamford.

" Lord bless ye," exclaimed Grumley, " that's nothink at all. There's a many chaps gets off twice as easy. Last sessions I had a feller at the Old Bailey for prigging from his master, who was a 'bakkinist. The indictment charged him with feloniously stealing twenty pounds of cigars; and everything was as clear against him as possible. But when Counsellor Sharply got up for the defence, he demanded that the cigars should be brought into court. So they was, and they were found to be them kind that has straws in 'em. So the counsellor orders all the straws to be taken out and has the cigars weighed; and then they prove to be less than eighteen pounds in weight. So he makes a fine speech for three hours and a half, arguing that the prisoner is accused of stealing twenty pounds' weight of cigars, and not twenty pounds' weight of cigars and straws. So the feller gets off."

" And this is really true? " exclaimed Page.

" As true as I'm sitting here," answered Grumley. " When I was a youngster, I was a sheriff's-officers' man — what's called a bum-bailiff. One day my master received a writ of ca. sa. to take the body of a genelman who'd died very much in debt, and whose executors wouldn't pay a mag of his liabilities. Well, my master and me went and stopped the funeral just as it was entering Pancras Church. Out jumps the chief executor from the black coach; and he says, says he, ' You're welcome to the body; but if you dare lay hand on coffin or shroud, or anything that the corpse is wrapped up in, we'll have our action against you.' So my master determined on taking the body away naked in a hackney-coach; but up comes the solicitor for the executors and says, says he, ' Your powers as a sheriff's-officer don't allow you to make a forcible entry. The lid of this coffin is the front door of the dead body's present residence; and you will break it open at your peril.' So my master saw the force of this reasoning and gave up the matter. There's technicalities for you."

"Very remarkable," exclaimed Page.

"Not so wery wonderful neither," resumed Mr. Grumley, "when compared with other things that I can tell you. There was my old friend Duggins, the horse-dealer. He was a twenty-thousand-pound man, and he made a will which said, ' I leave all my black and white horses to my eldest son, Joshua Duggins; and the residue of my live stock I leave to my youngest son Samuel.' Now it seemed that some of the horses was black, others was white, and others was piebald, or black and white. Well, Joshua claims 'em all; and Samuel insists on having the piebalds. A lawsuit takes place; and Joshua's counsel argues in this manner: ' The black and white horses are clearly bequeathed to my client. He is entitled to the black: that is not denied. He is entitled to the white: that is also undisputed. Well, then, the will gives him the black and white, and therefore he must have the piebald.' The court couldn't resist this reasonin'; and Joshua gets a judgment accordingly."

"This counsel deserved the verdict as a reward for his logic," observed Page, highly delighted with these anecdotes.

"I'll tell you a case that come off last sessions at the Old Bailey," said Mr. Grumley. "One Bill Starks, a noted thief, was charged in the indictment for feloniously taking a diamond earring from a lady's person. It seems he was togged as a swell cove and sat next to her at the theatre, where the offence was committed in a moment when all the audience was greatly excited. But Counsellor Sharply pleaded in his defence that there was no robbery from the person: because when the prisoner unhooked the diamond drop from the lady's ear, it fell into her lap, and she, instantly perceiving what was done, gave him into custody. So the fact was that there was no taking from the person at all; and he was acquitted."

"Your stories get better and better, Mr. Grumley," said Page. "It's only half-past ten," he added, referring to his watch. "Have you got any more to tell us?"

"Lots," replied the constable. "But we must be jogging now, and I'll give you a few more anecdotes another time. Come, genelmen."

Thus speaking, Mr. Peter Grumley rose from his seat; and, opening a cupboard, he took thence a rough and heavy upper coat, into which he worked himself by innumerable contortions of his portly frame. In each of the two pockets he thrust a huge horse-pistol; he fastened a cutlass to his waist, so that it was concealed by the great thick coat when buttoned across his ample chest, and grasping a stout club, he intimated by a familiar nod and a smile that his preparations were complete.

"Now we'll take a hackney-coach and be off," he observed. "My men, under Mobbs's orders, are already half-way there."

Mr. Grumley, Sir Richard Stamford, and Mr. Page sallied forth accordingly.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE RESULT

Shortly before midnight the Magsman, the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, the Beggarman, Mr. Martin, and Mr. Ramsey were assembled in conclave at the house in Thacker's Court.

It was very evident, by the manner of the parties, that a reconciliation had taken place between Ramsey and the landlord of the Beggar's Staff; in fact, it was indispensable to the interests of the former to forgive, though he might not forget, the murderous attempt made upon him on the river, and it was owing to the intervention of the Magsman that the affair had been thus patched up.

"Well," said the formidable Joseph Warren, who might be looked on as the president of this council of iniquity, "we can resolve upon nothing until Julia Lightfoot returns. It was fortunate that she happened to be here at the time, Briggs, or you would have had no one to send on this business, and the night would have been lost."

"Here she is!" exclaimed the man to whom the latter remark was addressed; for at the moment a low knock at the front door was heard.

In less than a minute Julia found herself in the presence of the miscreants thus assembled in solemn conclave; and she was welcomed by the Magsman, the Big Beggarman, and the Gallows' Widow as an old acquaintance. Believing, too, that she was sincere in her wish to join them, they congratulated her upon the resolution which she had formed to that effect.

"And now what news, young woman?" demanded Ramsey, as she took her seat at the table.

"Sir Richard Stamford lives at the house to which I was sent," she replied, without the least indication of embarrassment. " He has lodged there since yesterday, and is in and out a great deal. I pretended to be a poor servant out of place, and got into conversation with the landlady. It happens that she requires a maid-of-all-work just at the present time; and I gave her a reference to some fictitious person and feigned address."

" Good," murmured the Gallows' Widow, with that inward kind of low chuckle which was more dreadful to hear than the boisterous mirth of the wildest orgy.

" Sir Richard went out while I was there," continued Julia. " He is a tall, stoutish man, of commanding appearance, and very handsome; wears Hessian boots and a short cloak."

" Exactly so! " cried Martin. " You have tracked him to his kennel, and he shall not escape us."

" As he was going out," resumed Mrs. Page, " he asked the landlady for a latch-key, saying that he should not be home again until between two and three in the morning, as he had a consultation with some Bow Street runners to attend — "

" Ah! I told you that the warfare had begun! " exclaimed Ramsey. " He has been collecting his proofs, and now he has fairly opened the campaign. What next, young woman? "

" The landlady gave him the latch-key," proceeded Julia; " but as he took it from her hand, it fell upon the pavement and rolled toward the gutter. We were all three standing close by the threshold of the door when this happened. I officiously stooped down to look for the key, and, indeed, I found it immediately. But I pretended not to be able to find it, and secreted it in my dress while still groping about in the mud. At length the search was abandoned, and, the landlady having promised to sit up till two for the baronet, he thanked her and took his departure. He seems a generous man, for he gave me half a crown for my trouble in searching after the key."

" This is better than we could have expected! " exclaimed the Magsman. " You have managed admirably, Julia. Where is the key? "

" Here," she answered, handing him the object of his inquiry.

The reader scarcely requires to be informed that Julia acted in this manner with regard to the latch-key in order to support the statement which she had been making; and in that aim she fully succeeded.

" Now, how many people live in the house where you have been? " demanded the Magsman.

" The landlady is there alone at present," was the reply. " She is without a servant, and she was complaining bitterly to me about the badness of the times, observing that Sir Richard Stamford was the only lodger she had, and that she had two floors to let."

" Our course is as easy and plain as it well can be," observed the Magsman. " Briggs, the Beggarman, me, and Julia will go over there without delay. We shall want Julia to show us the right house, so that there may be no infernal mistake. The latch-key will admit us, and we shall bind and gag the landlady. When Sir Richard knocks at the door, Julia will open it. He will readily believe that she is the new servant, after seeing her there this evening. The rest will be managed quietly enough."

" Then I shall stay here till you return, Joe," said the Gallows' Widow.

" Certainly; and so will our two friends here," added the man, glancing toward Martin and Ramsey. " There's plenty of lush in the cupboard — isn't there, Briggs? "

" Plenty," was the answer.

" And you can therefore make yourselves comfortable," said the Magsman, addressing himself to his mistress and the two partners. " Come, we'll be off. There's not much time to lose."

Thus speaking, the villain rose from his seat; and drawing a pistol from each pocket in his coat, he assured himself that the weapons were primed and ready for use. This example was followed by the Big Beggarman, who was equally well armed; while Briggs put on his own upper garment and likewise secured a brace of pistols about his person.

Julia could not avoid shuddering as she beheld those menacing instruments; for the thought flashed to her mind, that should her treachery be suspected at the moment when the attack was made on the party, a bullet from one of the weapons might be the only recompense she was likely to obtain from the adventure. But she had gone too far to retract; and, instantly summoning all her courage, which was by no means trivial, to her aid, she prepared to accompany the three villains.

But the lynx eyes of the Gallows' Widow had noticed that cold tremor which had passed over her, evanescent as it was; and advancing straight up to her, she fixed a piercing look upon her countenance, saying, " You are afraid, Julia! "

" Not a whit," was the calm and firm response, while the gaze was met as steadily and unflinchingly.

" What's the matter, Lizzy? " demanded the Magsman.

" Julia trembled, that's all," replied the woman, in a tone indicative of suspicion.

" I don't think I did," said Mrs. Page, with a voice and manner that bespoke confidence; " but if I did, it was because I might not at the moment feel exactly comfortable respecting the work which those pistols are perhaps destined to perform before morning."

" I'm sorry if I wronged you, Julia," said the Gallows' Widow, her suspicions now subsiding. " But as no one amongst us ever trembles through fear, I thought it must be through some other cause."

" If you suspect me of any evil intent, you'd better go and personate the servant yourself," exclaimed Julia, with well-affected indignation. " It's too bad when I've done all I could, and have been praised for what I have done, to be insulted in this manner."

" Come, come, be friends, you women," growled the Magsman, impatiently. " You're too suspicious, Lizzy, and you're too timid, Julia."

" Remember that affair of Page, the commercial traveller," said the Gallows' Widow; " and then tell me that I am too suspicious. However, I don't want to be unjust toward Julia, and I therefore now declare to her that I am satisfied."

" Oh, I am not vindictive," exclaimed Julia. " You are right to be on your guard. But time will show whether I am to be trusted or not. Here's my hand, Mrs. Warren."

" And here's mine, Julia," responded the Gallows' Widow.

She held Mrs. Page's hand in her own for nearly a minute; and finding that it trembled not, her suspicions were completely lulled.

This little scene, which for a moment appeared to menace Julia with a terrible danger, having taken place, glasses of raw spirit were handed around; and the Beggarman, Briggs, the Magsman, and Mrs. Page issued forth together.

The night was very dark, and the rain was now falling heavily. So silent were the court and the street into which it led, that Julia felt assured the sounds of the men's heavy footsteps would give the constables ample warning of their approach, wherever those functionaries might be concealed.

Briggs and the Beggarman went a little way in advance; the Magsman and Julia walked side by side a few paces in their rear. Not a word was spoken; and they proceeded at a rapid rate.

But just at the moment when the little party were turning the corner at the end of the street, Briggs and the Beggarman were suddenly seized upon by four constables, who overpowered them in an instant.

"Treachery, by God!" vociferated the Magsman; and, as the words fell from his lips, he aimed a tremendous blow at Julia with the butt-end of one of his pistols.

But she glided away the instant that the scuffle in front met her ears; and the next moment the Magsman was pinioned from behind, by the strong grasp of Mobbs himself, while another official passed a noose over his neck, which, falling around his body outside his arms, fastened them to his sides and rendered him thus far powerless.

"Damnation!" roared the Magsman, flinging himself on the ground, and bestowing three or four kicks of savage ferocity on the constables by whom he was environed.

But they speedily mastered him; and he was borne to a hackney-coach, which was waiting in an adjacent street, and in which the Big Beggarman and Briggs were already securely deposited.

Mobbs and two other constables entered the vehicle; and the prisoners received a very plain and unceremonious intimation from the official first named, that the slightest attempt at resistance or escape would be followed by the blowing out of the offender's brains.

The Magsman, Briggs, and the Beggarman vented their rage in sullen oaths; and the coach drove rapidly away toward Clerkenwell Prison.

We must now return to the Gallows' Widow, Ramsey, and Martin, whom we left at the house in Thacker's Court.

Scarcely had the front door closed behind the expeditionary party, when a feeling of uneasiness began to creep over the Magsman's mistress. A sort of presentiment appeared to tell her that her friends were betrayed. Julia's conduct recurred to her mind, accompanied with suspicions which every instant grew stronger; and yet she endeavoured to wrestle against them, and persuade herself that these fears were only imaginary.

" You appear uneasy," said Ramsey and Martin, both giving utterance to the same observation at the same moment; and they surveyed her with all the acute suspense inseparable from a consciousness of guilt.

" I don't like this business at all," answered the Gallows' Widow. " I wish we had never undertaken it. Why couldn't you have managed your own affairs without coming to us? " she demanded, in a savage tone, a sinister light flashing in her eyes.

" Now don't be angry, my dear young woman," said Ramsey, who, as well as his partner, had caught the infection of her augmenting terrors. " But tell us what you fear? What is there to apprehend?" he demanded, hurriedly.

" Julia Lightfoot's manner haunts me," answered the Gallows' Widow, with a vehemence quite unusual on her part. " But I will just follow them a little distance. I dare say that my fears are groundless — nevertheless — "

" We will go with you," said Ramsey, trembling at the idea of being thus left in a house which treachery might invade with constables at any moment.

" And I also," exclaimed Martin. " Have you any weapons? "

" None," responded the Gallows' Widow. " But you can do no good, and will only draw attention to me if there's any foul play going on in the street. Stay here — I command you," she exclaimed, with as much imperiousness as if she were a queen dictating to the servile courtiers who are ever ready to kiss the toe of royalty.

" Well, we will stay, then," said Martin, in order to propitiate the woman of whom he began to be afraid.

" If there's any treachery intended, it will be executed close by," observed the Gallows' Widow, now resuming her naturally mild and subdued tone; " for the Bow Street runners would as soon do their work in this neighbourhood as by enticing our friends over into the Borough. I shall not therefore go far, and I hope to return in a few minutes."

With these words she quitted the house.

Along the court hastened the Gallows' Widow. She emerged into the street, strained her eyes to penetrate the darkness as she looked up and down, and, perceiving nothing to alarm her, hurried on in the same direction which her friends had taken five minutes previously.

All was quiet; for, in truth, the short but energetic struggle between the three miscreants and the constables was already over, and they were by this time safe in the hackney-coach, as ere now stated.

Suddenly the sounds of light footsteps approaching fell on the ears of the Gallows' Widow. She stood up in the dark shade of a doorway, and a female passed hurriedly by. It was Julia, who, having watched from a little distance the success of the constables and the discomfiture of the three villains, was retracing her way up the street to endeavour to find where Grumley's corps, with her husband and Sir Richard Stamford, was concealed.

The keen eyes of the Gallows' Widow instantly recognized the young woman, who in a moment felt a hand clutch her by the shoulder.

" Where are you going? " demanded the former, in a resolute voice.

So completely unexpected was the appearance of the Gallows' Widow, and so abrupt was this question, that Julia was now really confused and embarrassed; and her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth.

" What has happened? Why are you alone? Speak! " exclaimed the woman, whose desperate character, in spite of her reserved manners and habitually subdued tone, was no secret to Mrs. Page.

" You have no right to question me," responded the latter; and, bursting away, she flew along the street, the Gallows' Widow pursuing her with an equal agility.

The entrance of the court was gained; but Julia was passing it rapidly by, when the Gallows' Widow succeeded in overtaking her.

" Now you shall answer me, or I will dash your brains out against the wall! " cried the infuriate woman, flinging herself upon Julia with the rage and force of a tigress.

The violence of the assault, which Mrs. Page turned around to resist, brought them both to the ground; but at the same moment the trampling of many feet were heard, and in another instant Grumley's detachment, headed by this official himself, appeared upon the spot.

" What the devil's all this? " ejaculated Mr. Page, recognizing his wife by her voice, for it was too dark to catch a glimpse of her features, and Julia was crying for help.

" Wretch! " shrieked the Gallows' Widow, dashing the young woman's head upon the pavement; then, suddenly starting up, she bounded away, leaving her shawl in the hands of Grumley, who had fixed his iron grasp upon her.

Two of the constables rushed off in full pursuit; while Mr. Page raised his wife, who, though for a few moments partially stunned by the blow which she had received, soon recovered her senses.

" The Magsman, Briggs, and the Beggarman are captured," she hastened to observe; " and Ramsey and Martin are alone in the house. At least, I should think that they must be there still," she added.

" At all events, we will lose no time in entering the place," exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford.

" Come along," said Mr. Grumley, and the party turned into the court.

Mr. Grumley did not adopt the useless ceremony of knocking at the door; but, throwing his herculean form with all his force against it, he burst it open in a moment. He then rushed into the back room, guided by the light which peered from beneath the door of the chamber; and Ramsey and Martin suddenly found themselves in the power of a posse of constables.

" We are lost! " exclaimed the elder banker, clasping his hands, and sinking back on the chair from which he had sprung when the first evidence of the assault upon the house had met his ears.

" Ah! our enemy! " ejaculated Ramsey, catching sight of the tall form of Sir Richard Stamford in the doorway.

" Now, mind, genelmen," cried Grumley, " anythink you say here will be used against you elsewhere, according to the stattit in that case made and purwided. The game's all up, I can tell you; your accomplices is in the hands of my man Mobbs, and you'll all sleep to-night in Clerkenwell."

"We will attempt no resistance," said Ramsey; "but pray remove us with as little noise as possible. There's no use in arousing the whole neighbourhood."

"Come along quiet, then," returned Grumley. "As for me, I'm a perfect lamb of an officer when genelmen behave as such; but if they tip me any of their nonsense, I precious soon become as queer a customer to deal with as a lion rampant."

What Mr. Grumley's ideas of a lion rampant might be, we cannot pretend to guess. The warning was not, however, lost upon the two bankers, who submitted without the slightest attempt at resistance to the disagreeable process of handcuffing which now took place.

"May I be allowed to say a word to Sir Richard Stamford in private?" asked Mr. Martin, in an imploring tone.

"Not very well," responded Grumley.

"Nor should I consent to the proposition, were it admissible," said the baronet, with a voice and manner which too plainly indicated that his partners had no mercy to expect at his hands.

"You are here to triumph over us at last, Sir Richard," observed Ramsey, in a tone of hateful malignity.

"No, sir; I am here to aid the officers of justice in securing two offenders against the sacred rights of private friendship and the public laws of society," was the calm and deliberate answer.

At this moment the two constables who had set off in pursuit of the Gallows' Widow made their appearance, with the intimation that she had succeeded in effecting her escape.

"Well, it can't be helped," observed Grumley, taking the announcement with the phlegmatic coolness peculiar alike to the man and to his office. "We've got five gallows' birds, and so we may manage to do without the Gallows' Widow," he added, chuckling at his own joke.

The subordinate constables laughed also, as in duty bound toward their superior; and the whole party then moved away from the house.

But Mr. Ramsey's fears relative to the arousing of the neighbourhood were fully justified by the appearance of the court when they all emerged into it. The inhabitants of the dwellings, alarmed by the bursting open of the door, had crowded to the threshold, many of them holding candles in their hands in order to ascertain what was going on; and when the prisoners, the constables, Sir Richard Stamford, Page, and Julia issued from the house, a general buzz and murmur of voices indicated the curiosity which was experienced on all sides.

Ramsey and Martin held down their heads as they passed rapidly along the court, now completely illuminated by the candles at the doors and the light streaming from the open windows; and bitterly, bitterly, in the depths of their souls, did they repent the hour when they first stepped aside from the path of rectitude and honour.

" There's been a precious smash-up there in Briggs's house," observed one of the spectators to another.

" Ah! and many will be implicated, I'll be bound," was the response.

" Officer," exclaimed the first speaker, " what's the number of chaps taken? "

" Five on 'em," answered Grumley, who was somewhat proud of the night's achievement.

" And they're sure to be all scragged! " cried the querist, in a tone expressive of joy. " I say, Bill," he added, turning toward his neighbour, " won't it be a precious lark to see five on 'em tucked up at one time? We ain't had such a treat for the last six months. Ah! George the Third's the king for hanging up his subjects in half-dozens and dozens! A nice father of his people he is, ain't he, Bill? "

The answer that was given to this remark did not reach the ears of the two prisoners; for at that moment the party turned from the court into the street. But Ramsey and Martin shuddered from head to foot as those awfully prophetic words, relative to the hanging, flippant though the manner of their utterance might have been, struck like a knell upon their startled ears.

Two hackney-coaches had been provided by the officers for this night's work; one had already departed with its freight for Clerkenwell Prison, and the second now received the two bankers, together with Grumley and a couple of runners.

Sir Richard Stamford, Page, and Julia departed in one direction, while the vehicle took another; and in due course Mr. Martin and Mr. Ramsey were lodged in the gaol whither the Magsman, Briggs, and the Big Beggarman had preceded them.

For in the times of which we are writing, the system of retaining prisoners in the custody of the constables until after the examination before a magistrate was not an invariable practice, and individuals charged with serious offences were usually conveyed at once to a prison.

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE MANŒUVRING MILLINER

It was about eight o'clock in the morning following the night of adventures just related; and Mrs. Brace awoke from a pleasant dream in her downy bed. Hastily referring to her watch, which lay upon a little table close at hand, she discovered that she had somewhat overslept herself; and, rising from her couch, she thrust her feet into a pair of slippers, put on a dressing-gown, and drew back the window-curtains. The pavement of Pall Mall looked white and frosty, for the weather was intensely cold; but, reckless of the freezing air, the handsome milliner proceeded to comb out her long black tresses, and when she had performed this portion of her toilet, she entered an adjoining room, in which there was a large bath filled with water.

Laying aside her vesture, Mrs. Brace unhesitatingly plunged into the bath, the thin ice which covered the surface of the water breaking with a sharp crackling sound into a myriad pieces as the robust form of the lady thus broke through it.

For a few instants her teeth chattered, for the water was cold, piercingly, bitterly cold; but this sensation speedily passed away, and as she rubbed herself all over with her hands, a glow of warmth was suffused throughout her entire frame. In three or four minutes she emerged from the bath; and then the rapid friction of large coarse towels augmented that genial heat, and while her cheeks became animated with the ruddy tinge of health, her neck, shoulders, bosom, and limbs appeared polished, white, and dazzling as alabaster.

Resuming the slight attire which she had put off, Mrs. Brace returned to her bedroom, arranged her hair in negligent curls, which showered down her back, performed her ablutions with scented soap, and used a costly pearl-powder for her teeth. Having thus beautified herself, she put on a becoming cap, and retired again to her couch.

Almost immediately afterward Harriet, the lady's-maid, entered the room, and appeared surprised to find that her mistress was not up and dressed.

"I am somewhat indisposed this morning," said Mrs. Brace; "and shall take my breakfast in bed. By the bye, Lord Florimel will call a little before nine o'clock; but he may come to me here, as I know that he wishes to see me on some important business."

"Very good, ma'am," returned the abigail; and she quitted the room.

In a few minutes Harriet reappeared, carrying a massive silver tray, on which the milliner's morning repast was spread. The chocolate was steaming in a silver pot, the boiled milk was contained in a cream-jug of the same metal, and a round of toast, made with great care, was kept warm by the plate being placed over a basin of hot water. In fact, had Mrs. Brace been a duchess, it was impossible to serve her with a more delicate attention.

Harriet retired, and the milliner was half-reclining on the large downy pillows, sipping her chocolate, when Lord Florimel made his appearance.

Throwing aside his cloak and hat, the young nobleman approached the bed, saying, "My dear friend, I am quite chagrined to hear of your indisposition. What is the matter with you, and when were you taken ill?"

"I awoke with a dreadful headache, but it will pass away presently," answered Mrs. Brace, assuming the languid tone and looks of an invalid. "You must excuse me, my dear Florimel, for receiving you in my bedchamber —"

"It is not the first .time I have set my foot in this sanctuary," interrupted the nobleman, with a sly smile.

"True," observed Mrs. Brace; "it was here that you dressed yourself in lady's attire, preparatory to the little adventure with Miss Pauline Clarendon."

"You mistake, my dear friend," said Florimel. "I did not dress myself; it was you that performed the duties of abigail on my behalf."

"And I remember you were so naughty all the time that

I had the greatest difficulty in lacing your stays and hooking your gown," returned the milliner.

"I must admit that I snatched a kiss or two while you were thus engaged, my dear friend," observed Florimel; "but I was a very wicked fellow then. Now, as you are well aware, I am thoroughly altered, and, indeed, I may be safely trusted in any lady's bedchamber in the universe."

"Still in the same sentimental mood, my lord?" exclaimed the milliner, smiling archly in spite of her affected indisposition. "A few weeks have made a marvellous alteration in you."

"But Pauline is so beautiful, so truly beautiful!" cried the young nobleman, with an unfeigned enthusiasm; "and she is so amiable, so good, so gentle, so virtuous — "

"I have not a doubt of it," interrupted Mrs. Brace. "But shall you always remain faithful to her? Think you that, when you are married to her, you will never go astray?"

"I am too much a man of the world to believe in the existence of such constancy on the part of one of my own sex," responded Florimel, gravely; "but this I do declare and believe, that years will elapse before temptation can become sufficiently strong to render me faithless to Pauline. At all events, I shall strive to merit her good opinion, I shall endeavour by my conduct to deserve her; and you may depend upon it, my dear friend, that if I had not known you for a considerable time, I should not have ventured up into your bedchamber on this occasion."

"Then you consider me to be no one?" said Mrs. Brace, pouting her lips in so ravishing a manner that Lord Florimel could not help thinking to himself how remarkably handsome the milliner was looking.

"You misunderstand me altogether," he exclaimed. "I consider you to be a very dangerous creature," he added, smiling, "on account of your beautiful person and your fascinating manners."

"Well, I am glad to see that your lordship can pay a compliment, in spite of the sentimentalism which has taken so firm a hold upon you;" and Mrs. Brace smiled also, but it was to display her brilliant teeth to the best advantage.

"Oh, I am not unmindful of the claims of other ladies upon my admiration," said Florimel; "but then, I have acquired strength sufficient to enable me to resist all temptations. As I was observing, however, I look upon you so much in the light of a sincere friend, that I do not hesitate to venture into your bedchamber. Were it otherwise, I should not have come hither, even if you were only a quarter as handsome as you really are. And permit me to observe that, considering your indisposition, you look uncommonly well; your cheeks are animated with a healthy glow, and your eyes sparkle brilliantly."

"I am slightly feverish, perhaps," said Mrs. Brace.

"On the contrary, you are quite cool," returned Florimel, after a pause, during which he had taken her hand. "But tell me, my dear friend," he continued, "what is the nature of this important business concerning which you desired to see me?"

"I will explain it," said Mrs. Brace, throwing herself back upon the pillows, and stretching her white hands beneath her head in such a manner that the movement necessarily made the sleeves fall back, as they were unfastened at the wrists, thus displaying to the eyes of the young nobleman the superbly moulded arms. "Yesterday evening," she resumed, as if quite unconscious of the act just recorded, "a young lady, dressed in deep mourning, called upon me. It appears that she has very recently lost both her parents, under what circumstances she did not inform me; and she was so completely overwhelmed with grief, when speaking of them, that I dared not ask her. Since that period, however, she has been meditating seriously upon the course of life which she ought to adopt in order to earn a livelihood. The poor creature possesses a few hundred pounds; but she does not wish to exist in idleness upon a sum of money which must sooner or later be exhausted. Being skilful with her needle, she thought of turning that talent to advantage; and, having procured a list of the principal millinery establishments in London, she resolved to apply to them for work. As accident ordained mine was the very first house whereat she called; and I made immediate arrangements with her. This evening she takes up her abode beneath my roof."

"Ah! my dear Mrs. Brace, I begin to understand, nay, more, I do comprehend the object for which you have sent for me," exclaimed Florimel, in reproachful tone; "but I dare not, no, I dare not — I am proof against temptation."

"At all events, my good friend, I lost no time in making you acquainted with the circumstance," said Mrs. Brace. "The moment the young lady took her departure, I despatched a note to your lordship's mansion."

"Our past connection, and the nature of it, render me grateful to you for this preference," observed the nobleman; "but again I say, I dare not. No, I have at length obtained a formal introduction to my Pauline; I have passed in her society, at the house of a mutual friend, one of the most delicious evenings of my life; I saw her adorning the ballroom, radiant in her youthful beauty and matchless in elegance and grace, and I could not prove unfaithful to her. Believe me, my dear friend, I really love and adore Pauline Clarendon, and I should hate myself were I to forget the vows which I have pledged to her, and the oaths which I have secretly taken within the depths of my own heart."

"It is not for me to tempt you to break those vows," said Mrs. Brace; and by another movement, skilfully executed and having all the air of negligence, she afforded a glimpse of her bosom. "At the same time," she continued, "I must inform you, my dear friend, that never have you seen a more charming creature than the young lady who is to take up her abode beneath my roof to-night. She is not more than sixteen, the very age which you most admire; and her form is a perfect model of symmetry and grace. Her eyes are a fine dark blue, melting and tender; her hair is a deep brown, lustrous with a rich gloss; and no lily can compare with the whiteness of her skin. You know that I am a good judge of beauty in my own sex, Florimel, and I can assure you that this angelic girl of whom I am speaking is far superior to any whom you have ever beheld in this house."

"Do not say any more upon the subject," exclaimed Florimel, whose passions were inflamed not only by the picture which Mrs. Brace had drawn of the fair unknown, but likewise by the contemplation of her own charms; for he found it impossible to withdraw his gaze from that breast of snow.

"Now listen to me, Florimel," said Mrs. Brace, turning her countenance upon him, and assuming her most witching looks; "you love Pauline, you have sworn to be faithful to her. But was not the vow somewhat rashly made, and will it not be difficult to keep? Months must elapse before you can marry her; for the sake of decency in reference to the usages of the world, you cannot propose to her, or rather, admit that you have proposed to her, under six or eight weeks. Then her father will have to be consulted. Of course he will consent to the match; but it would be unseemly to a degree and indelicately precipitate to fix a very early day for the bridal. As I have observed, therefore, some months will intervene ere you lead your beloved Pauline to the altar; and, during that period, must you remain an anchorite? I cannot believe that you will; and I do not consider that Pauline herself has a right to make such an exaction. When once you are her husband, she may then have a right to demand an account of your proceedings; but in the interval you are still your own master, free and independent."

"I comprehend all the speciousness of your reasoning, and yet I can scarcely resist it," murmured Florimel, in a subdued tone. "Oh, my dear friend," he exclaimed, suddenly starting from the chair which he had occupied close to the bed, "do not tempt me; I implore you not to undermine the good resolutions that I have formed. My Pauline has a right to my constancy, has a claim upon my fidelity. The peculiar circumstances under which our acquaintance was formed — "

"Will prevent her from giving you the credit which your constancy and fidelity would assuredly deserve," added Mrs. Brace.

"I dare not remain to hear you argue thus, my dear friend," cried Florimel. Then, seizing her hand, and pressing it warmly, he said, "I cannot find it in my heart to reproach you, although you really deserve vituperation from my lips. But I have a sincere friendship for you; I would do anything I could to serve you, and you know it. Show me, therefore, some gratitude in return, and tempt me not."

"My dear Florimel," said Mrs. Brace, pressing his hand with violence, as if it were an involuntary act, or rather, one prompted by the fervour of grateful feelings, "I am aware of your kind and generous sentiments in my behalf, and I thank you sincerely, oh, most sincerely! For I have always been fond of you from the first moment that we met —

and — and — to tell you the truth, Florimel — But, no — it would be ridiculous on my part — "

And Mrs. Brace burst into tears.

"My dear creature," exclaimed the young nobleman, throwing his arm around her neck, "what, in the name of Heaven, is the matter with you? Have I said or done aught to afflict you? If so, I declare most solemnly that nothing was farther from my intention. Speak — tell me — leave off weeping — "

"Oh, you will despise me, you will laugh at me, Florimel!" murmured the handsome but crafty milliner, drawing him toward her in such a manner that his cheek rested against her own.

"I am incapable of treating a friend with ridicule," said the nobleman. "But tell me, my dear creature, tell me, what you would have me understand?"

"That I love you," answered Mrs. Brace, in a tone of melting tenderness.

"Alas! this is most unfortunate," said Florimel, his voice expressing commiseration; "for you are well aware that my heart is devoted to Pauline — "

"Think not, my lord," interrupted the milliner, "that I was insane, mad, rabid enough to suppose that you could love me in return — me, who am so many years older than yourself. But you have caressed me, you have complimented me. How could I do otherwise than conceive an affection for you — you who are so eminently handsome? Oh, there was no favour, there is none, which you might not have demanded of me with the certainty of its being accorded."

And, as she thus spoke, Mrs. Brace wound her arms around the nobleman's neck and fastened her lips to his.

Now, in spite of all his excellent resolutions, his vows, and his sincere intention of remaining faithful to Pauline Clarendon, Lord Florimel was placed in a situation which afforded an opportunity that could scarcely be resisted. And the reader must make all possible allowances for him, if his firmness did rapidly ebb away.

Alas! we must confess that Florimel was on the point of surrendering, when his good genius interposed. Or was it for thy sweet sake, O innocent and beauteous Pauline, that some propitious power manifested its saving influence at that moment when the vows pledged to thee were on the point of being lost in perjury?

We know not; suffice it to say that at the instant when Mrs. Brace was about to triumph and Lord Florimel to succumb, a hasty knock was heard at the door of her chamber.

The young nobleman burst from the arms of the milliner, who instantly threw herself back upon the pillows, drawing her vesture over her palpitating bosom; then, in a voice as composed and collected as she could render it, she exclaimed, " Come in! "

Harriet, the lady's-maid, entered the room, bearing a letter.

" I shall now say farewell," cried Lord Florimel, inwardly rejoicing at this providential interruption; for a sudden revulsion of feeling had revived all his good resolutions in a moment. " I see that you have business to attend to, my dear friend," he added; then, having pressed her hand, he hurried away, regardless of the look which she cast to implore him to remain.

" From whom does this note come? " demanded the disappointed and enraged milliner, scarcely able to subdue an inclination to wreak her spite and annoyance upon the abigail.

" A young woman, dressed in widow's weeds, brought it, ma'am," was the answer. " I should not have intruded until you were disengaged, but that she said the letter was of the utmost importance to you as well as to others."

" Strange! — whom can it be from? " murmured Mrs. Brace. " Is the person waiting? "

" Yes, ma'am. But I'm inclined to think that there's something strange about her, for the moment I opened the street door, she rushed in and shut the door again of her own accord, just for all the world as if she was afraid of being seen coming here, or as if some one was watching her outside."

" Wait an instant," said Mrs. Brace, a vague misgiving seizing her; for as she turned the soiled and ill-folded letter over in her hand, she could not help associating it in some way or another with her husband, the Magsman.

At length mustering up courage to open it, she saw that the contents were written in a scrawling female hand, as was also the address outside; and, with a sinking of the heart and a changing countenance, she perused the following lines:

"MADAM: — Fearful that when you hear a stranger wanted to speak to you at this early hour, you might send down a message to say you was engaged, or something of that sort, I take the liberty of sending you this note while I wait for your answer. I want you to see me at once and without delay; because I've something of the greatest importance to tell you about Joe Warren, and something or another that you must do, since he is in trouble and I'm unable to help him as I could wish. So if you want to avoid bother and exposure and all that, you'll be so good as to see me in private at once; and if not, I shall know what to think and how to act. But I mean no offence, only to let you see that I'm firm.

"Your humble servant,
"ELIZABETH MARKS."

Harriet, the lady's-maid, saw that her mistress changed colour and grew considerably agitated as she read the note; for indeed Mrs. Brace was utterly unable to conceal, much less subdue, the painful motions which its contents excited in her bosom.

"You may conduct the woman hither," she said, in a low and hoarse tone.

The abigail withdrew; and the milliner instantly rose, slipped on her dressing-gown, and seated herself in a chair near the toilet-table to await the coming of this most unwelcome visitress.

The colour had completely fled from her cheeks, which, though retaining all their natural plumpness, were now ghastly in appearance.

Presently the door opened; and a young woman in widow's weeds was introduced by Harriet, who immediately retired, leaving her mistress alone with the stranger.

"Sit down," said the milliner, in a suffocating tone, as she pointed to a chair; "and now tell me what has occurred, who you are, and what you require of me."

"In the first place, ma'am," said the Gallows' Widow, — for she it was, — "Joseph Warren was arrested last night, and he's in prison now. Secondly, I suppose there's no offence in my telling you that I'm his very particular friend — "

" I understand you, young woman. Go on! " exclaimed Mrs. Brace.

" Thirdly, then, I want you to do a certain something which I can't explain in a moment, and which will help him to get out of gaol as comfortable as possible," added the Gallows' Widow, " or else he'll be hung, to a certainty."

The milliner shuddered, not so much at the idea of the probable fate of the Magsman, but at the thought that she should have the misfortune to be so closely linked to such a wretch.

" Ah! you may well be shocked, ma'am," observed the Gallows' Widow, on whom the tremor which thus convulsed the entire frame of Mrs. Brace was not lost; " it would indeed be an awful thing for you to know that your own husband was hung up like a dog."

" Spare your comments, young woman," said the milliner in a stifling voice. " I see that you know all — everything? " she added, fixing a searching look upon her.

" Yes, all — everything," responded the Gallows' Widow. " Warren has no secrets from me. I am acquainted with his adventure here, in this very house, one Sunday night, when the Prince of Wales was hid behind the curtain — "

" Hush! " murmured Mrs. Brace, putting her forefinger to her quivering lip. " I do indeed perceive that you know all. But on what charge has this unhappy man been arrested? "

" Rather inquire, madam, upon what charge he has not been arrested," said the Gallows' Widow, emphatically. " There is no use in mincing matters with you. He is sure to be hanged if he don't escape, — and I can't help him. In fact, I should be made a prisoner myself if I was seen by any of the runners, and it was in a sort of desperation that I came to you now. These clothes," she added, glancing down at her dress, " are quite enough to betray me; but I don't dare go near the place where I live to get a change, and I must wait till dusk before I can venture to a shop where they sell second-hand things."

" I will give you a change presently," said Mrs. Brace. " And now tell me what you wish me to do. But let me warn you beforehand that if you think or hope that the prince can aid in this matter, you are very much mistaken."

"I am not such a fool as to entertain such an idea, ma'am," answered the Gallows' Widow. "But you can do something, and I'll tell you what it is. Warren is sure to be committed to-day for trial at the Old Bailey. The sessions are now on, and the magistrate won't throw any delays in the way of getting rid of a man who has so long been a terror to the public, and who has hitherto set the constables at defiance. This is the truth, and there's no use in closing one's eyes to it. So to Newgate will Warren be taken before night. But he must not stay there, ma'am, till his trial comes on; he must escape, or nothing can save him."

"And do you wish me to aid in that escape?" asked the milliner, trembling from head to foot.

"I do," was the firm and emphatic reply; "and I will tell you how. But first let me observe that if you agree, I will find some means to convey to Warren an intimation, in the course of to-day, that he has friends actively working for him, and that there is hope."

"Proceed, and state your plans," said Mrs. Brace.

The young woman unfolded her scheme; but as the details thereof will transpire in due course, it is unnecessary to record them now. Suffice it to observe that, after a long conversation, the milliner consented to adopt the course proposed by the Gallows' Widow; and the latter, having changed her weeds for a dress which Mrs. Brace procured for her from Harriet, took her departure, well pleased with the result of this interview.

CHAPTER XLIX

A VISIT TO MRS. LINDLEY'S HOUSE

While this scene was taking place at the dwelling of the handsome milliner in Pall Mall, the Honourable Arthur Eaton, who had risen early that same morning, was repairing on foot toward Fore Street, Lambeth.

The young gentleman felt so much better and stronger that he was now capable of walking some considerable distance. The fresh, frosty air did him good, and there was a roseate hue upon his cheeks, until recently so wan, so thin, so pale.

On reaching Fore Street, he had no difficulty in discovering the midwife's house. Its sombre and sinister aspect, the large wooden shades which projected over the windows, and the heavy curtains drawn inside all the casements, were sufficient indications of that dread establishment, the exterior of which he had not failed to observe on the night when he visited it in company with the Countess of Desborough.

His summons at the front door was speedily answered by Mrs. Lindley, herself; and the old harridan started back in dismay the moment she recognized Arthur Eaton. But instantly recovering herself, — for she was a woman of strong nerve and great presence of mind, — she threw all the courtesy of which she was capable into her invitation to enter the parlour; and a few moments saw the young gentleman and the midwife alone together in that gloomy apartment.

Mrs. Lindley placed a chair for the accommodation of her visitor; and seating herself near the fire, she caressed her great cat, which put up its arching back as it rubbed itself against her legs, purring all the time with a sound resembling the wooden works of a Dutch clock when being wound up.

"I wish to speak to Miss Aylmer," said Arthur Eaton, breaking a silence which seemed awful in that chamber of funereal gloom.

"Miss Aylmer left me yesterday, sir," answered the midwife.

"Left you yesterday!" exclaimed the young gentleman, in amazement. "At what o'clock did she thus take her departure?"

"At about five in the evening," was the response.

"But her uncle and the countess are unaware of this circumstance," hastily observed Arthur; "for I was with them between eight and nine last night, and they knew not that Miss Aylmer even contemplated a removal for the next fortnight."

"It is nevertheless as I have told you, sir," replied Mrs. Lindley.

"This is most extraordinary!" exclaimed Arthur. "Whither is she gone?"

"I am as ignorant as yourself on that head," was the rejoinder.

"Woman, you are deceiving me!" cried the young gentleman, in a stern tone.

"You may search throughout my dwelling, if you please," said Mrs. Lindley, with an air and manner of such confidence that Eaton saw she was speaking the truth.

"But this departure must have been sudden — precipitate?" he remarked interrogatively.

"Somewhat so," returned the midwife. "The monotony of this place became intolerable to her, and, finding herself strong enough, she went away."

"And yet it is not three weeks since she was confined," exclaimed Arthur. "There is something mysterious and even wrong in this step which she has taken," he added, rather in a musing tone to himself than addressing the midwife. "That she should not have returned to the abode of her excellent uncle and his generous-hearted countess, I cannot understand. They learned from me last night my intention to visit Miss Aylmer this morning; they were made acquainted with the object for which I desired an interview with Fernanda — "

"And that object?" said Mrs. Lindley, in a voice of anxious inquiry.

" Does not regard you, madam," responded Mr. Eaton, somewhat sharply, as if he thought her query to be impertinent. " But I had a twofold motive in visiting this house to-day. My first and principal object was to see Miss Aylmer; my second was to hold a very serious conversation with you."

" With me! " ejaculated Mrs. Lindley, unable to subdue or conceal the strong spasm of terror which shook her entire frame; for her guilty soul was appalled with a thousand dreadful apprehensions sweeping through her imagination.

" Yes, madam, with you," repeated Arthur, emphatically, and at the same time fixing upon the woman a look in which abhorrence, pity, and reproach were visibly commingled.

" Hush! do not speak too loud — walls have ears; the people passing in the street may stop to listen," said the midwife, in broken sentences hoarsely whispered, while terror was evidently obtaining a firmer hold upon her.

" I am not accustomed to use intemperate language, nor to speak with excitement," observed Mr. Eaton. " You have nothing to fear from me, either, profound — alas! too profound — as my acquaintance with your crimes now is. I am not here as a minister of justice, but as one who would urge you to repentance. No, for the sake of that young but guilty creature whom I first tutored in the ways of error, I will spare you. You need not, therefore, dread even exposure at my hands; but I warn you, Mrs. Lindley, that this forbearance on my part depends solely upon the candour and truthfulness with which you shall respond to the questions that I am about to put to you."

" What do you mean, good sir? " inquired the woman, her countenance becoming ghastly, and her whole form shivering and shuddering from head to foot. " You spoke of crimes — or did my ears deceive me? "

" No, that was the word I used," answered Mr. Eaton, solemnly.

" Crimes! " murmured the midwife, staring upon him with a dull vacancy, as if her senses were appalled.

" Rouse yourself to hear and understand me, woman," proceeded Arthur, in the same serious, impressive, and unexcited tone. " When I was here upwards of a fortnight since, I discovered two documents in yonder bookcase, and of those documents I took copies. The one was a receipt for a slow poison, the other was its antidote. The poison had for months been circulating in my veins, the antidote is rapidly restoring me to health and life!"

"My God! you will send me to the scaffold!" moaned the wretched woman, falling on her knees at the feet of the Honourable Arthur Eaton.

"No, I will pardon you, on the condition that I have named," said the young gentleman, forcing her to rise, and compelling her to reseat herself.

"O Lord! what will become of me?" she murmured, covering her haggard face with her long, skinny hands, and rocking herself backward and forward in a state of mind more easily conceived than explained.

"I tell you again that you have nothing to fear, beyond the stings of your own guilty conscience, if you answer my questions faithfully and truly," said Eaton.

"Oh, sir, how generous you are!" cried the wretched woman, endeavouring to compose her features and steady the thoughts that were whirling in her brain. "Demand of me what you will, I swear to reply frankly and honestly."

"In the first place, you will give me an explanation of the way in which my valet, William Dudley, was suborned to administer slow poison to his master," said the Honourable Mr. Eaton.

"William Dudley is a distant relation of mine," returned Mrs. Lindley, terror compelling her to speak the truth. "When Miss Aylmer first discovered that you did not intend to fulfil your promise and make her your wife, she resolved upon vengeance. This was while she was at her uncle's seat in Derbyshire, and while you were staying at Marchmont Castle, in the same county. Her first impulse was to poison you, and by means of heavy bribes she won over William Dudley to her interests. But Dudley recommended her to consult me; and when she was compelled to confess her situation to the Earl and Countess of Desborough, that nobleman inserted an advertisement in a newspaper to the effect that a place of the strictest retirement was sought for a young lady. In consequence of a letter which I received from William Dudley, I answered that advertisement; and thus was it contrived that Miss Aylmer should become an inmate of my establishment. In the eyes of the earl and countess this arrangement had no appearance of having been previously concerted; and in due time Miss Aylmer took up her abode beneath this roof.

" Continue your narrative," said Mr. Eaton. " It has all the aspect of truth, and it is well for you that your explanations are thus candidly and frankly given."

" When once Miss Aylmer was here," proceeded the midwife, encouraged by the young gentleman's observations, " you may readily conjecture how easy it was to concoct a scheme of vengeance on her behalf. Allured by the large sums which she lavished upon me, — for she appears to have an illimitable command of gold, — I consented at an evil hour to aid her in the accomplishment of her vindictive designs. Then did I reveal to her the mystery of that subtle poison for which I possess a receipt; and, in compliance with a letter despatched to Marchmont Castle, William Dudley solicited leave of absence to visit London for a few days."

" I remember it well," observed Mr. Eaton. " Proceed."

" He came hither, received his instructions, together with the poison, and hastened back into Derbyshire," continued the old woman. " Immediately afterward your mysterious malady commenced."

" Yes, this is true," murmured Arthur, shuddering from head to foot at the cold-blooded cruelty thus revealed.

" You are therefore satisfied that I am not deceiving you now? " said Mrs. Lindley, in a tone of anxiety.

" Too well satisfied, too well convinced that you are speaking the truth," was the solemn answer.

" And you will spare me — you will not make use of this confession against me — "

" No, no; I have already pledged myself on that head. And, now, woman," continued the Honourable Mr. Eaton, " you will tell me whether this infernal poison is at work elsewhere? Have you other victims — "

" I solemnly and sacredly assure you that there breathes not a human being who, at least to my knowledge, is now suffering from the effects of that poison," responded Mrs. Lindley, emphatically.

" 'Tis so far well. And now give me those two receipts," said Arthur.

The midwife rose from her chair, opened the bookcase, drew forth the large volume, and took thence the two papers which the Honourable Arthur Eaton had demanded.

"I am afraid that your memory retains but too well the particulars herein recited," he said. "At all events, it will be prudent to serve them thus."

And he threw the receipts into the fire, where they were consumed in a moment.

"Would to God I had never seen them, never had them in my possession at all!" exclaimed the midwife. "Oh, sir, how can I sufficiently thank you for your forbearance with regard to me?"

"Be assured that henceforth I shall keep a constant watch upon you, Mrs. Lindley," answered the young man; "and that if you sin again, nothing shall prevent me from handing you over to the grasp of justice. But you have yet another answer to give me; for I must know whence and how you obtained these receipts?"

"From an old man named Lightfoot," responded Mrs. Lindley. "I heard a few days ago that he was dead."

"Now, then, our interview terminates," said Mr. Eaton, rising from his chair. "But before I take my departure, let me again warn you to be circumspect in your future conduct. You have been dealt with by me in a merciful manner; and if anything can lead you to repentance, it must be the startling conviction that your neck is thus humanely withdrawn by my hand from the halter into which you had thrust it."

"Heaven knows I never can forget your goodness, nor cease to reflect upon the words which have just fallen from your lips," murmured the midwife, in a suffocating tone.

"God grant that the impression may be permanent," said Eaton; and he hurriedly quitted the house, the atmosphere of which seemed painful for him to breathe.

When he was gone, Mrs. Lindley threw herself back in her armchair, and gave way to a long train of thoughts. Terror had so subdued and unnerved her that, while the young man was in her presence, and even for a considerable time after he had taken his departure, she was profoundly touched by the sense of her own abominable wickedness and by his unparalleled generosity. But as the effects of that tremendous fear gradually subsided, her heart relapsed into its wonted callosity, even as the lava, which the volcano's raging fire melts with liquid softness, hardens and cools down into impenetrable rock.

At the expiration of an hour from the time that Eaton left her, she fortified herself with a strong cordial; and then repairing to her own private chamber, she opened her strong box, and counted the piles of gold which she had amassed. Oh, how speedily, how completely are the better feelings of human nature crushed and hidden beneath the weight of riches; how easily does the smitten conscience experience an anodyne in the ill-gotten wages of iniquity! Thus was it with this diabolical hag; and ere midday she chuckled over her gold, chuckled over her impunity, chuckled over the narrow escape which she had that forenoon seen!

Hours passed away, the shades of evening crept slowly upon the hemisphere, and soon after dusk a sharp and impatient knock was heard at the front door.

Mrs. Lindley hastened to answer the summons; and a lady, enveloped in a mantle and closely veiled, entered the passage.

The midwife said nothing, for she knew who the visitor was; and she led her immediately into the parlour, the door of which she closed carefully.

The lady raised her veil and revealed the countenance of Fernanda Aylmer, — that countenance which was still pale and colourless, but which now wore an expression of firmness and decision.

"You did not expect me so soon again, my dear Mrs. Lindley?" said the young lady, as she seated herself near the blazing fire, for the weather was penetratingly cold without.

"I did not; but I knew you were there the instant that I opened the door," responded the midwife. "What has brought you hither this evening?"

"You shall soon know," answered the lady of angelic beauty and of demoniac heart. "In a word, then, I have seen Arthur Eaton, and I am convinced that Dudley is playing us false."

"And yet it was he himself who announced to us, yesterday morning, that Mr. Eaton was gradually, nay, almost rapidly, recovering his health," observed Mrs. Lindley. "How can you reconcile this fact with the idea that he is deceiving us?"

" Listen to me patiently for a few moments," returned Miss Aylmer. " When you received that letter yesterday morning, in which Dudley informed you that his young master was, by some unaccountable means, triumphing over the poison nightly administered to him in the water placed by his bedside, I asked you particularly if you thought the poison could in course of time lose its effects. You answered me emphatically in the negative. With this assurance in my mind, I could still perceive three distinct ways of accounting for the alteration in Arthur's outward appearance. The first was that the near approach of death was heralded by a hectic glow on the cheeks which Dudley had mistaken for the returning hue of health; the second was that Arthur had discovered the cause of his malady and was taking the antidote; and the third was that Dudley no longer administered to him the poison."

" All these considerations I likewise weighed in my own mind," observed Mrs. Lindley; " and while I rejected the last, I wavered between the two first."

" And I fluctuated amidst all three," returned Fernanda. " Well, in that state of uncertainty and suspense, resolved not to abandon my vengeance, and yet fearful that it would escape me, I determined to leave your house, take a lodging as close to Lord Marchmont's mansion as possible, and satisfy myself with my own eyes as to the alteration which had occurred in Arthur's appearance. Moreover, I was anxious to see Dudley, tax him with deceiving me, and judge by his replies how far my suspicions on that head were well founded. Accordingly I obtained apartments in the very next house to that where Arthur dwells with his father. I slept in my new lodging last night. This morning I enveloped myself in my cloak, concealed my face with this thick black veil, and walked about Hanover Square until near midday. Presently I saw my seducer approaching. He was proceeding at a slow pace, and was apparently buried in deep thought. I obtained a full view of his countenance, but he noticed me not; and even if he had observed, he could not have recognized me. Oh, he is indeed altered in appearance, Mrs. Lindley," continued the vindictive young lady, the words hissing between her teeth from the rage that filled her bosom; " for it was no hectic tint which dyed his cheeks, no unnatural brilliancy which shone in his eyes. His step, too, was comparatively firm and elastic; and every symptom, every sign denoted returning health. I went back to my lodgings, and reflected on all this. My first hypothesis was destroyed; it was a resuscitating vigour, and not an approaching dissolution, which had produced that change in his appearance. Then I thought of my second theory. Could he have discovered the secret of his malady? Could he have obtained the antidote? No, for if this were the case, his suspicions would have fallen upon me, and ere now I should have been the inmate of a criminal gaol. What, then, can I believe? That Dudley has repented and has ceased to administer the poison!"

"I have heard you with patience, my dear young lady, because you requested that I would do so," said Mrs. Lindley. "But it is now my turn to speak. Arthur Eaton was here this morning."

"Ah! and for what purpose?" demanded Fernanda.

"He has discovered everything — and pardoned everything," replied Mrs. Lindley, in a low but impressive tone. "Poison and antidote are alike known to him, and Dudley has not deceived you."

"You amaze me!" ejaculated Miss Aylmer, now painfully excited.

"Hush! not so loud — the walls have ears!" whispered the old harridan, impatiently. "Yes, he has discovered all; he came hither to see you upon some matter of importance, but the nature of which he would not reveal to me, and he was surprised when he found that you were gone. Last night he was with your uncle and the countess —"

"I care not for them — my vengeance is the sentiment that absorbs all other considerations!" interrupted Miss Aylmer, impatiently. "How came he to discover the secret of his malady? How came he to possess the antidote?"

"The night that he was here with the Countess of Desborough, he found the receipts in that bookcase," answered Mrs. Lindley; "and a chemist has doubtless been consulted. He said that for your sake he would spare me, and his language was kind and considerate respecting yourself."

"Oh, I scorn his kindness, I contemn his forbearance!" exclaimed Fernanda, every lineament of her beauteous countenance convulsed with rage. "Think you that my revenge shall pause in its progress here? Do you imagine for a single moment that I am to be melted by his pardon, soothed by his forgiveness? No, no; it is not thus that Fernanda Aylmer buries her wrongs in oblivion!"

And she rose to depart.

"What are you about to do, my dear young lady?" demanded Mrs. Lindley, in an imploring tone. "Consider, pause, reflect, I beseech you! Any attempt you make upon Mr. Eaton's life may redound with fearful consequences on ourselves. Oh, do nothing rashly or hastily, I entreat you! His forbearance may yield to exasperation, his merciful spirit may be moved to retaliation. Nay, to ensure his personal safety, he may be induced to invoke the assistance of the law, and then you involve me in your destruction."

"Fear nothing, good woman," said Fernanda, in a cold and resolute tone; "whatever I may now do shall be done well and effectually. I see that William Dudley is faithful; aided by him, my vengeance will be consummated in a moment. There, give me a phial of some deadly poison for that gold!" she exclaimed, throwing a heavy purse upon the table.

"Hush! the very walls have ears," murmured the midwife, in a hoarse and hollow whisper. "My God! you would destroy me, body and soul, Miss Aylmer. Have mercy upon me!"

"Well, for a tenth portion of this amount of gold a chemist will supply me with what I require," said Fernanda, coolly, as she took the purse up again.

"Stay — I will do it!" moaned rather than spoke the midwife, her avarice getting the better of her fears.

"Be quick, then, for I am anxious to depart," said the young lady.

Mrs. Lindley quitted the room, hastened up to her own private chamber, and speedily returned with a small phial in her hand. This she gave to Fernanda, from whom she received the gold in exchange.

"The potion may be relied upon?" inquired Miss Aylmer, with a significant look.

"Death will be almost instantaneous if only three drops be poured between the lips of a sleeping person," answered the midwife, in a voice that was scarcely audible.

"You are not deceiving me, Mrs. Lindley?" exclaimed Fernanda, eying the woman suspiciously.

"On my soul, I entertained not such an idea for a moment," returned the midwife.

"We will see," said Miss Aylmer, coolly; and as she spoke she caught up the great black cat in her arms.

"Young lady, I forbid you to injure that animal!" cried Mrs. Lindley, in a far louder and more excited tone than she was accustomed to speak. "Put it down again, I say!"

And she endeavoured to wrest the cat from Fernanda's grasp.

"Be quiet — I command you!" exclaimed Miss Aylmer. "We shall disturb the house —"

"True — my God!" murmured the midwife, falling back into her chair.

At the same moment the cruel and merciless young lady forced the orifice of the bottle into the cat's mouth, and poured a considerable quantity of the fluid down its throat. Then, rising suddenly from her seat, she let the animal drop upon the rug, where it lay motionless; and the atmosphere of the room was impregnated with a strong odour of almonds.

"Now are you satisfied?" demanded Mrs. Lindley, in a tone of gloomy rage. "The poor animal was killed in a moment, as if struck by lightning."

"I am sorry that I should have deprived you of a favourite, my good friend," responded Fernanda, almost gaily, so pleased was she at the result of her experiment; "but I can assure you that I am much happier now that I have acquired the certainty of consummating my vengeance at any moment. Farewell, Mrs. Lindley; you need fear nothing."

"Will you not see your friend Caroline Walters, before you leave?" inquired the midwife.

"Not this evening, not this evening," answered Miss Aylmer, impatiently. "I am in too great a hurry to see your relative, William Dudley."

The young lady then took her departure.

As soon as she was gone, the midwife lifted the dead cat from the rug; and as she did this, a heavy sigh escaped from her breast. For this infernal old hag, who held human life as naught, and who without compunction could cast a new-born child to the deep waters of the Thames, this fiendish wretch found her heart moved to compassion by the fate of a favourite cat! Nay, more, she descended into her back kitchen; and, raising a stone with some sharp instrument, she dug a hole with a fire-shovel, and interred the cat then and there. And as she threw back the earth, a tear fell from her eye; for she remembered how the huge beast had loved her, and how it was wont to purr when she caressed it.

Having disposed of the corpse of her cat, Mrs. Lindley returned to the parlour and sat down to reflect upon the dangers which she was likely to incur from the new step that Fernanda Aylmer was taking. At length her fears increased to such an extent, that she was resolved to adopt some energetic proceeding in order to warn Arthur Eaton of his danger.

Her measures were soon decided upon. She would repair at once to Lord Marchmont's mansion and obtain an interview with that nobleman's son. But then, might she not encounter her relation, William Dudley, and, allured by the gold of Fernanda Aylmer, would not this individual betray to the young lady the circumstances of the old midwife's visit?

Yes; this was a difficulty, however, that was not insurmountable, and, opening her desk, Mrs. Lindley penned the following letter:

" I am waiting in a hackney-coach close by. If you value your safety, come out and speak to me. I have something of the utmost importance to communicate. But you must not allow William Dudley to learn that I am so near.

" The Midwife of Fore Street."

Having sealed this letter, she addressed it in a feigned hand to the Honourable Arthur Eaton, writing the word " Private " on the envelope. Then, muffling herself up in a cloak, the hood of which she drew over her head, Mrs. Lindley sallied forth, took a hackney-coach at the nearest stand, and ordered the driver to proceed to Hanover Square.

In due time the vehicle stopped, according to her instructions, within a short distance of Lord Marchmont's mansion; and the coachman delivered the note at the front door. Several minutes elapsed, during which Mrs.

Lindley remained in torturing suspense. Mr. Eaton might not be at home — perhaps he would not return until very late — and, in this case, what was she to do? The murder might be accomplished before morning; and justice might eventually trace out her complicity in the deed.

But these reflections were suddenly interrupted by the appearance of the Honourable Arthur Eaton; and Mrs. Lindley, leaning forward so that her lips almost touched his ear at the window of the vehicle, said, in a low, hoarse whisper, " Fernanda has been with me this evening, and she is resolved upon your death. A poison, which kills its victim as if he were struck by a thunderbolt, is in her possession, and she will not scruple to use it."

" I thank you sincerely, most sincerely, for this information," answered Mr. Eaton, in the same subdued tone. " Now you have given me a proof of better feelings on your part, and you shall not repent your altered conduct. Farewell."

With these words he hurried back into the mansion, and the vehicle immediately drove away.

CHAPTER L

THE POISONERS

It was midnight, deep midnight, as proclaimed by all the clocks in the vast metropolis; and a profound silence reigned throughout the mansion of Lord Marchmont in Hanover Square.

But, hark! a door, slightly creaking on its hinges, opens on one of the upper stories; and a man, who has not laid aside his clothes, nor thought of retiring to his couch, comes forth. He bears in one hand a candle, which he shades with the other; and the light shines upon the countenance of William Dudley.

There is an unnatural pallor upon those cheeks usually florid and healthy; a sinister gleaming appears in the eyes that are wont to have so meek and placid an expression, and the whole aspect of the man denotes a troubled mind.

He starts at his own shadow, which seems a tall black spectre creeping after him along the passage wall; now he pauses and hesitates; his avarice weighs in the balance against his fears, and a straw shall turn the scale.

Oh, on such occasions how seldom is it that the better feelings of the human breast obtain the victory! The valet has calculated Fernanda's gold in contrast with the value of his master's life and the risk he runs in aiding her to take it, and he pursues his way.

He descends the stairs, stopping frequently to listen as the steps creak beneath him; and now he is again startled by his own shadow as it appears to chase him around an angle which he is turning.

But at last he gains the hall; and, placing the light in a niche, he cautiously and noiselessly opens the front door.

A lady, with a thick black veil over her countenance, instantly enters the mansion; and William Dudley closes the door.

"Did any one observe you, miss?" demanded the valet, in a whisper which, though scarcely audible, expressed the most intense anxiety and alarm.

"The square was utterly deserted," answered Fernanda. "You have nothing to fear, and yet you seem to tremble like a leaf."

"Why, miss, to tell you the truth, when I was a little boy, my father, who was a good man, used to tell me that the eye of God saw everything; and it really does appear to me as if God's looks were fixed upon me now."

These words were delivered in a very low but impressive voice; and for an instant Fernanda Aylmer was staggered by their force. But, speedily recovering herself, she placed a heavy bag in the valet's hands, saying, "Twice the promised amount shall be yours to-morrow, if you only enable me to succeed to-night!"

And William Dudley, securing the gold about his person, took the candle from the niche and led the way up-stairs without uttering another word.

That man had bartered his soul for gold: it was like selling his God, since he knew that the Almighty's eye was upon him. Had he been an atheist, his crime were less, because he would not then have believed that he was sinning against his Maker and violating Heaven's own blessed laws. But he was a Christian in faith, — he had faith, too, in that heaven and in a juxta-existing hell, — and yet he dared to lend himself to a deed of murder!

When the well educated sin, their iniquity is ten thousand times greater than that of the poor ignorant peasant or unlettered operative; and therefore are the backslidings of royalty and aristocracy offences more positively heinous and damnable than even the blackest deeds which the uneducated poor ever perpetrate. Adultery (a vice so common in the upper classes) on the part of a titled lady deserves a larger measure of God's wrath than even infanticide on the part of an ignorant young woman belonging to the lowest grade; and drunkenness in a peer is worse than theft in a peasant.

But while we are pausing to make these reflections (and the disgusting demoralization of the British aristocracy

"'ATTEMPT NOT TO ESCAPE'"

Original etching by Marcel.

never can be exposed too often), William Dudley and Fernanda Aylmer have gained the landing which communicates with Arthur Eaton's chamber.

Slowly, gradually, noiselessly did the perfidious valet turn the handle of the door; and in a few moments Fernanda Aylmer crossed the threshold of the apartment, followed by her accomplice.

Eaton was in bed; and his eyes were closed, apparently in profound slumber. The candles were burning upon the night-table; an open book showed that the young man had been reading. All was silent, solemnly silent, save the regular respiration of the occupant of the couch; for both Fernanda and William Dudley held their breath through the fear of awakening their intended victim.

Taking the phial from the bosom of her dress, Miss Aylmer raised her veil and advanced toward the bed, with a step so light that it seemed as if she were treading upon the air and not upon the floor.

But the instant that she reached the foot of the couch, Eaton sprang up to a sitting posture, exclaiming, "Fernanda — Dudley — attempt not to escape, or I will alarm the house, and hand you both over to the officers of justice!"

The valet rushed forward and threw himself upon his knees by the bedside, his countenance ghastly with terror and remorse; while Fernanda, amazed and stupefied, was riveted to the spot, her eyes staring wildly upon the countenance of Arthur Eaton, as if she could scarcely believe that he was indeed awake, and that her diabolical scheme had failed signally.

"Rise, sir, and hear me attentively," said the young gentleman, in a stern and commanding tone to his valet; "and you, Fernanda, compose yourself as well as you can, for our conference, unseasonable though the hour is, may perhaps be a long one."

"And if I refuse to remain here another moment?" cried Miss Aylmer, endeavouring to veil her bitter disappointment and rage beneath an assumed tone of haughty confidence.

"I shall ring this bell violently," answered Eaton; "you will be stopped upon the stairs, and I would then abandon you to your fate."

"And if I remain, what am I to expect at your hands?" demanded the young lady.

"Mercy, pardon, forgiveness," he responded, in an altered and softened voice.

"I shall remain to hear all you may have to say," returned Fernanda; "but I scorn your mercy, despise your pardon, contemn your forgiveness."

"Be seated and listen to me with patience," said Eaton. Then, addressing himself to the valet, who had risen from his knees, and was standing near the foot of the bed, he added, "And you also, William, give me your attention."

Miss Aylmer took a chair, for she felt worn out with the excitement and fatigues which she had undergone during the last few hours.

"You are both, no doubt, prepared to learn that your guilt is known to me in all its details," resumed Arthur Eaton. "Accident threw in my way two receipts, — the one a poison, the other its antidote. A chemist explained to me their nature and effects, and the same moment that revealed to me the cause of my mysterious malady, placed in my hands the means of cure. Sixteen days have elapsed since then; and already I have been enabled, under Heaven's mercy, to wrestle successfully with death. But every night, William Dudley, has your hand impregnated with poison the beverage placed by my side; and every morning have you found the decanter empty. Think not, however, that I imbibed the contents: no, it is the antidote which I have taken instead. And now you marvel wherefore I have remained thus silent, thus patient, thus tranquil during these sixteen days; you wonder why I have forborne from invoking the aid of the law to punish those who sought to send me to an early grave? I will explain to you my motives for this forbearance. Associated as you are, William Dudley, with this young lady in the black designs which Heaven's intervention has made abortive, you are, of course, no stranger to the cause — the unhappy cause — of her burning animosity against me. Alas! I know that I have wronged her, deeply wronged her; and I will not advance a single reason to palliate my perfidy and my crime. I will admit that I have been both perfidious and criminal; and it is therefore for her sake that I have hitherto cherished in my own bosom the tremendous secrets which constitute the history of my lingering malady and providential cure. Had I given you, William Dudley, up to justice, had I taken a constable to the house of your relative in Fore Street, for the purpose of consigning her to a criminal gaol, I could not in justice have spared Miss Aylmer. And even if I had spared her, there were a thousand chances that the arrest of her accomplices would have led to the elucidation of her guilt. For her sake, therefore, I have held my peace, — for her sake I shall still remain silent. Not even my beloved father suspects aught of all this; no, nor even your uncle and the countess," he added, turning toward Fernanda.

The young lady showed, by a slight inclination of the head, that she heard and understood him; but not a syllable fell from her lips.

"And now, William Dudley," continued Arthur, after a short pause, "you may wonder that I should have still retained you in my service during the last sixteen days. I had two objects in contemplation by thus acting. The first was to ascertain whether the spectacle of your young master recovering health and strength, after reaching the very verge of the grave, and retracing the path to life and vigour in spite of the venom which you had infused into his veins, — I was anxious, I say, to satisfy myself whether such a spectacle would move your heart, touch you with remorse, and awaken better feelings within your soul. Had this trial resulted in your favour, I should yet have entertained the hope that you were not past redemption; I should have considered that it was well worth while to attempt the salvation of a fellow creature in such a case. Then, in due time, I should have taken you by the hand, and I should have said, 'Dudley, I know all. But you have repented, and I forgive the past as sincerely as if it had never been.' Alas! it is not in my power thus to address you. Night after night has the poison been mixed with the beverage placed by my side; and morning after morning has the chemist said to me, 'The water is envenomed still.' And now, as if to crown your tremendous guilt, you seek my chamber in the middle of the night, with what intent I need not tell you, miserable man that you are!"

"Mercy, mercy, Mr. Eaton! My God! spare me!" moaned the wretched Dudley, again sinking on his knees and joining his hands in entreaty, while the horrible workings of his countenance bore dread testimony to the nature of the emotions that were excited in his breast.

"I have already informed you that it is my intention to spare you, so far as the law is concerned," said Arthur, scarcely able to conquer a sensation of loathing and abhorrence in respect to the man in whom he had been so cruelly deceived. "Rise, sir, rise, I command you; and hear me out."

The valet resumed his standing posture at the foot of the bed; but his eyes were cast down, for he was unable to look in the face of that young man who had been so kind a master, and toward whom he had acted as a veritable fiend.

And all this while Fernanda remained seated, motionless as a statue, and as a statue pale and glacial in outward appearance; but Heaven alone can tell how dire, how terrible were the feelings that agitated her upheaved bosom.

"I have now explained my first motive for retaining you in my service since the day on which I discovered your guilt," resumed Mr. Eaton, continuing to address himself to the valet, on whose ears his words fell with a power and effect that shook him to the lowest confines of his being; and yet Arthur's language flowed in a calm, measured, unexcited strain, as if it were an unbiassed and merciful judge who was speaking. "My second motive," he continued, "was intimately associated with my intentions respecting Miss Aylmer; and as it appears that you have no secrets with each other, I will speak frankly and openly. Know then, Fernanda, that I went this morning to Mrs. Lindley's house in order to obtain an interview with you; and my object was to offer you my hand."

The young lady started at this strange announcement; but, instantly recovering herself, she said, in a tone of icy coldness, "It is well that you take to yourself credit for a deed of generosity, now that you may safely vaunt it without being expected to repeat the proposal."

"I take Almighty God to witness that such is the truth, the solemn truth!" exclaimed Arthur Eaton, emphatically. "Would you have other evidence thereof in addition to my word, seek your uncle, the Earl of Desborough, seek the countess, and ask them to tell you all I said to them last evening."

"You doubtless told them that I was a poisoner, but that you would forgive me," returned the young lady, with a bitterness and a malignity which showed how relentless and diabolical was her hatred toward him whom she had once loved with such an impassioned fervour.

"No, Fernanda," rejoined Arthur; "had I thought of betraying you to your nearest relatives, I should not have hesitated to give you up to justice. But I reasoned within the secret depths of my own soul, and I reflected that I had wronged you, that I had driven you to the desperation which prompted you to wreak so terrible a retribution, and that it was for me to make amends. Therefore did I hasten this morning to Fore Street; and had I found you in that place still, I should have said, 'Fernanda, God is giving me back my health; and in a few weeks I shall be perfectly resuscitated. Again do I offer you my hand; and now you cannot accuse me of an anxiety to make an atonement only when under the influence of that remorse which heralds an approaching dissolution. Be generous, Fernanda, even as I seek to be just; let us forget the past, and live in hope of a happier future.' Thus should I have spoken; and if you had still refused to accept the only amends which lay in my power to propose, at all events a weight would have been removed from my conscience. I should not have revealed to you the fact that I had discovered the secret of my malady and that you were the cause. That secret would have accompanied me to the tomb; and if you had proved a good wife to me, never should a word or look on my part have led you to suspect that your past iniquity was so fully known in all its details to me. I should have been happy in your repentance, your contrition; and I should have considered that I had saved a soul from that eternal ruin toward which my own conduct had driven it in the beginning to take the first step. Now, therefore, you can understand, William Dudley," added Arthur Eaton, once more turning to the valet, "my second motive for hitherto retaining you in my service. For as it was my intention to keep from Miss Aylmer the circumstance that I had discovered the cause of my malady, I should likewise have observed the same profound secrecy in that respect toward yourself."

"Oh, my good kind master, what a wretch I have been!"

exclaimed the valet, wringing his hands, while tears trickled down his cheeks.

"Peace, drivelling fool!" ejaculated Fernanda, turning sharply around upon him.

"Nay, speak not thus," said Arthur Eaton, in a severe tone of rebuke, as he fixed his eyes almost sternly upon Miss Aylmer. "Would to God that words of contrition might come from your lips!"

"Never!" cried the young lady, starting from her chair. "I see that you have turned a saint, Arthur Eaton, perhaps a hypocrite, and I now despise you, in addition to all the unconquerable hatred which my heart cherishes, and will ever cherish toward you."

With these words she turned abruptly away and advanced to the door.

The young man spoke not a syllable to detain her; and she took her departure.

A long silence then ensued in the chamber, Arthur Eaton lying back upon the pillows of his couch and giving way to his reflections, which on her account were painful in the extreme, and the valet still standing, a piteous object of mingled shame and remorse, near the bed.

"Dudley," at length said his generous master, "am I to believe that you are sincerely and truly penitent for the black iniquity in which you have been made an accomplice?"

"On my soul, dear sir, I could wish that it were all undone, that I could again be the innocent man I was ere temptation came in my way!" was the prompt and impressive answer. "Here is the gold which I received as an earnest of this night's contemplated crime," he continued, throwing the heavy bag upon the table near him; "and here," he added, drawing forth some papers from his pocket-book, "are the bank receipts for other moneys which I have at different times received from Miss Aylmer."

"Now am I assured that your repentance is sincere, William," said Mr. Eaton. "For the present I will take charge of those wages of iniquity; to-morrow I will tell you how they shall be employed. Retire to your own chamber, and fear not that I shall treat you with severity. No, it is my purpose to afford you every opportunity of making your peace with Heaven and becoming a useful member of society.

The man threw himself upon his knees, took his master's hand, conveyed it to his lips, wept plenteously over it, and endeavoured to express his gratitude and his penitence, but could not, for his voice was lost in profound sobs. He was deeply, deeply affected; and Eaton spoke kindly and feelingly to him.

At length William Dudley withdrew to his own chamber; but ere he sought his couch, he prayed long and fervently.

END OF VOLUME I.

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